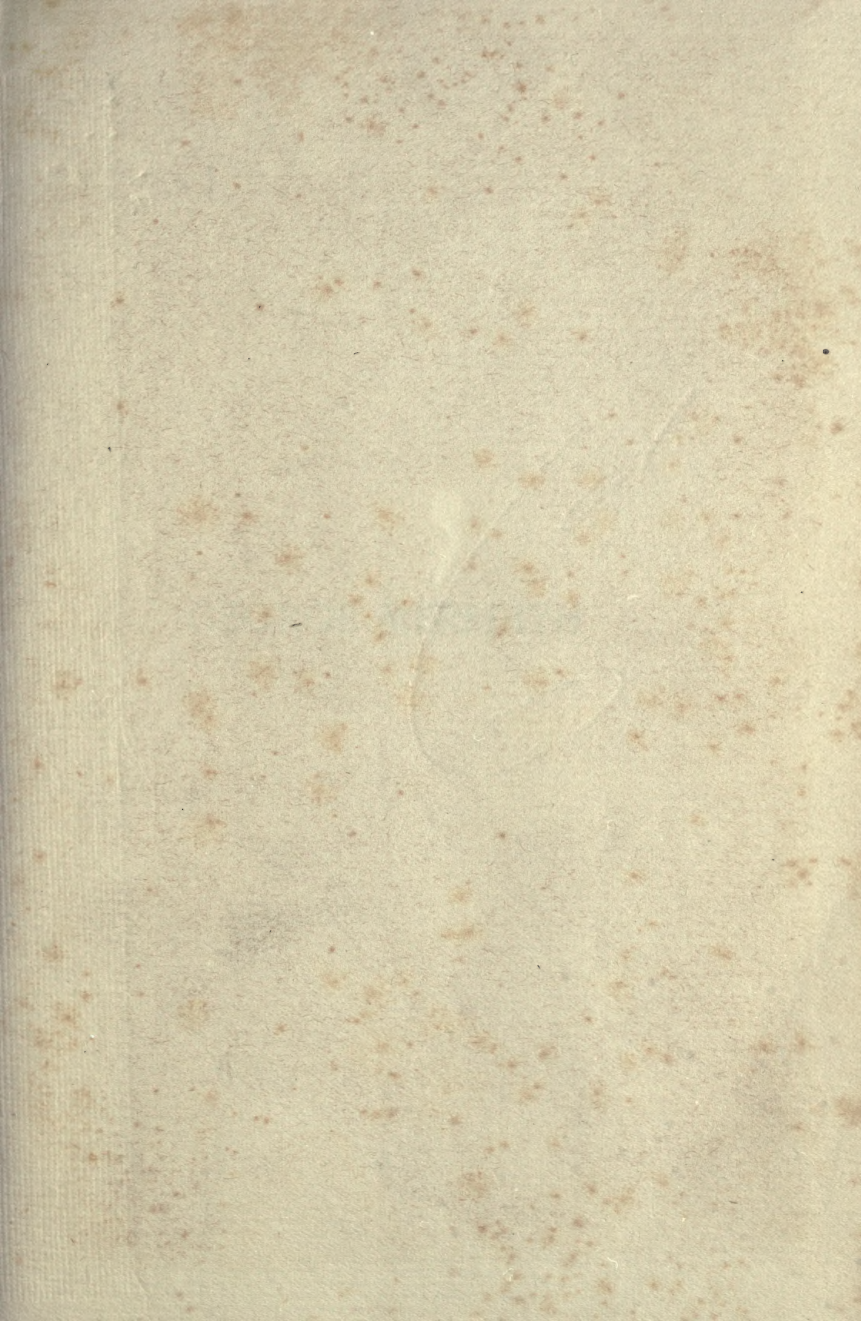


THE
COMPLETE
WORKS
OF
GEORGE MEREDITH

GEORGE MEREDITH







GEORGE MEREDITH

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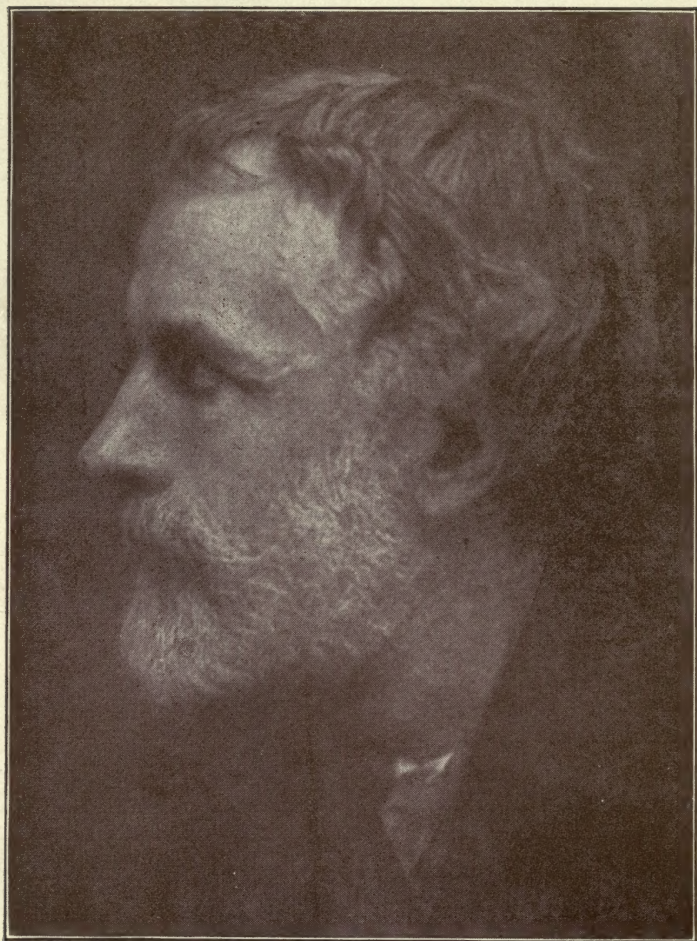


Photo by Frederick Hollyer.

GEORGE MEREDITH.

GEORGE MEREDITH

An Essay towards Appreciation

BY

WALTER JERROLD

“Life, some think, is worthy of the Muse.”

London

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TO

EDWARD CLODD

FIT FRIEND OF ONE OF OUR GREATEST



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INTERNAL HARMONY

ASSURED of worthiness we do not dread
Competitors ; we rather give them hail
And greeting in the lists where we may fail :
Must, if we bear an aim beyond the head !
My betters are my masters : purely fed
By their sustainment I likewise shall scale
Some rocky steps between the mount and vale ;
Meanwhile the mark I have and I will wed.
So that I draw the breath of finer air,
Station is nought, nor footways laurel-strewn,
Nor rivals tightly belted for the race.
Good speed to them ! My place is here or there ;
My pride is that among them I have place :
And thus I keep this instrument in tune.

GEORGE MEREDITH.

GEORGE MEREDITH:

AN ESSAY TOWARDS APPRECIATION

I

THE MAN

“I maintain there is wisdom in him when conventional minds would think him at his wildest . . . the man I am proudest to think of as an Englishman and a man living in my time, of all men existing. I can't overpraise him.”

Beauchamp's Career.

AT no time, perhaps, have Thackeray's words about the popular taste for particulars as to the private life of a hero been truer than at the present: “We all want to know details regarding men who have achieved famous feats, whether of war, or wit, or eloquence, or endurance, or knowledge. His one or two happy or heroic actions take a man's name and memory out of the

crowd of names and memories. Henceforth he stands eminent. We scan him : we want to know all about him ; we walk round and examine him, are curious, perhaps, and think are we not as strong and tall and capable as yonder champion ; were we not bred as well, and could we not endure the winter's cold as well as he ? Or we look up with all our eyes of admiration ; will find no fault with our hero : declare his beauty and proportions perfect ; his critics envious detractors, and so forth. Yesterday, before he performed his feat, he was nobody. Who cared about his birth-place, his parentage, or the colour of his hair ? To-day, by some single achievement, or by a series of great actions to which his genius accustoms us, he is famous, and antiquarians are busy finding out under what schoolmaster's ferule he was educated, where his grandmother was vaccinated, and so forth. If half a dozen washing bills of Goldsmith's were found to-morrow, would

they not inspire a general interest, and be printed in a hundred papers?"

There is considerable truth in this, and though we may feel that Thackeray is laughing at the extremes to which hero-worshippers will go in search of fresh information about the objects of their worship, yet we know also that he recognised the worthiness of the desire to know something of the lives and characters of great men. In commencing his lectures on the English humorists of the eighteenth century he explicitly stated that it was of the men's lives he would speak rather than of their books. Taste in biography has somewhat degenerated since the days when Thackeray addressed his audiences, and now, thanks to an unpleasant development of journalism, no matters concerning public men and women are too trivial or too far removed from the truth to be printed in certain papers, and, presumably, to be avidly read by a certain section of the public. To such

taste it is not my wish, even if I were possessed of the information, to pander. Indeed, in naming this introductory portion of my study of Mr Meredith's writings "The Man" I am perhaps laying myself open to the reproach of writing an amplified "snakes in Iceland" chapter. For the outside public Mr Meredith's life is but a chronological record of the publication of his writings; the reference books, which give us ample particulars of the lives of noisy nonentities, give the scantiest information about one of the greatest men of his age. And all that I can pretend to give here is such a compilation as is the result of collecting, since first my enthusiasm for the subject was awakened, any scraps of published Meredithiana.

Born in Hampshire on February 12, 1828, George Meredith is now in his seventy-fifth year. He was educated in Germany—to which fact, perhaps, he owes some characteristics of his literary style and

something of his development as poet-psychologist.

At the age of one-and-twenty Mr Meredith began to study law, but presumably without any very fixed resolve to continue in that service, for the year which saw him enter upon his new studies saw also the publication of his first poem; a piece by no means more remarkable than many writers of a like age have produced. This was entitled "Chillianwallah," and appeared in *Chambers's Journal*, July 7, 1849. It is a pretty piece of commemorative verse on the fatal battle of Chillianwallah, when the Sikhs killed and wounded nearly 2400 British under Lord Gough, on January 13, 1849. "The fatal field of Chillianwallah which patriotism prefers to call a drawn battle," says the historian:—

"Chillianwallah, Chillianwallah !
Where our brothers fought and bled !
Oh, thy name is natural music,
And a dirge above the dead !

Though we have not been defeated,
 Though we can't be overcome,
 Still when e'er thou art repeated
 I would fain that grief were dumb."

I recently noticed in an auction catalogue one item which bore striking testimony to the position in which Mr Meredith is coming to be regarded,—the "lot" consisting of the number of *Chambers's Journal* containing "Chillianwallah." It may be confidently predicted that the time will come when every scrap of Meredithiana will be collected and treasured as zealously as any other ana connected with our literature.

The law was soon abandoned for journalism and literature, and in 1851 was published the author's first slim volume of *Poems*.* Of the nature of the work in that volume and others noted in this brief record of Mr Meredith's life I shall have

* A copy of this book fetched £17, 5s. at auction a few years ago; as the poet has said in *Modern Love* :—

"How many a thing which we cast to the ground,
 When others pick it up becomes a gem."

more to say in succeeding chapters. The poems were dedicated to Thomas Love Peacock, one of whose daughters—Mary Ellen, widow of Lieutenant Nicholls—Mr Meredith had married in 1849. At the time of the publication of the volume the poet was living at Weybridge in Surrey, his father-in-law residing at Lower Halliford, by Shepperton, on the opposite side of the river.

Writing to Charles Ollier, the publisher who had known Shelley, Keats and Lamb, in July 1851, Mr Meredith spoke frankly of his expectations with regard to his recently-issued volume, and, with the self-assurance which is excusable in genius, of "better work to come." "It is the appreciation you give that makes Fame worth asking for; nor would I barter such communication for any amount of favourable journal criticism, however much it might forward the popularity and sale of the book. I prepared myself, when I published, to meet with injustice and slight,

knowing that the little collection, or rather selection, in my volume, was but the vanguard of a better work to come ; and knowing, also, that the strictest criticism could scarcely be more unsparing than myself on the faults that are freely to be found ; knowing, lastly, that a fresh volume (of poetry) is with the Press a marked book. . . . The poems are all the work of extreme youth, and, with some exceptions, of labour. They will not live, I think, but they will serve their purpose in making known my name to those who look with encouragement upon such earnest students of nature who are determined to persevere until they obtain the wisdom and inspiration and self-possession of the poet."

In journalism, it is said that Mr Meredith was for some time leader-writer on an East Anglian newspaper—I should like to study its columns—and later he contributed to the *Morning Post* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*. At the end of 1855 he published

his marvellous addition to fantastic literature, *The Shaving of Shagpat*, but the book was, from the publisher's point of view, a failure, and is said to have been sold off as a "remainder." Two years later came *Farina*, fantastic fruit of its author's sojourn in Germany, and two years later again *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, to be followed (1861) by *Evan Harrington*. Here and there a voice was raised in praise of the new writer, but cold neglect was for the most part his lot. Mr Meredith was, however, winning recognition from those men whose approbation it is best to win—men of genius, his peers. About this time he was living in a Surrey cottage near Esher, and his friend, the late Sir William Hardman, in contributing some chapters of reminiscences to *To-Day* about eight years ago, had some extremely interesting notes on visits to the poet. One extract from his diary, undated, but evidently belonging to the beginning of the 'sixties, may be taken as indicating

something of the simplicity of Mr Meredith's life: "We have just returned from a charming little country run of two days and one night. Yesterday morning we left Waterloo Station at 9.15 for Esher. All our mutual requirements were condensed into a little black bag, which I carried, and we started from the station at Esher triumphantly, regardless of vehicles, for a walk of two and a half miles to Copsham Cottage. We were going to stay all night with our good friend George Meredith. The heartiest of welcomes awaited us at the really humble cottage — for it makes no pretensions to anything, but performs a vast deal more than many great houses that promise so much. Meredith is a man who abhors ceremony and the conventionalities! After our first greetings were over, we turned out for an hour and a half before lunch. We had exhausted all our superlatives in extolling the day, and the walk between the station and the cottage, but

we had to begin again now. The scent of the pine woods, the autumn tints on the elms and beeches, the brilliant sunlight exulted us to a climax of ecstasy. We were children again. Luncheon on our return consisted chiefly of home-made products—bread, honey, jams, marmalade, etc., most delicious. Then came a general lighting of pipes and cigars, and off we started for another walk through lanes and wood to Cobham, a good six-mile business. We got back at five o'clock and dined at six. What appetites we had. Gracious goodness! Meredith's two other guests left at eight, to walk home to Walton-on-Thames, and then we put a log of wood on the fire and sat down for a cosy talk. Meredith read us some poems which are to form part of a volume shortly to be published. So passed the time till 10.30, when to bed we went, thoroughly prepared to sleep soundly as you may easily imagine. Up at seven, and away went Meredith

and myself for a brisk walk of three or four miles after taking a teacup of hot soup and a slice of bread. After breakfast Meredith retired to work at his book of poems, while we went to call on some friends in the neighbourhood. On our return he read to me the result of his morning's work—portion of a very pretty idyll called 'Grandfather Bridgman.'”*

The forthcoming volume was the *Modern Love* of 1862.

At about this time Meredith was writing for a striking periodical entitled *Once a Week*, a journal which numbered among its contributors, Millais, Rossetti, Leech, Harriet Martineau, Mr Swinburne, and other famous writers and artists. The poet-novelist had won the friendship of men each of whom was making his mark upon the time, and in 1862 he joined some

* *To-Day* also contained about the same time a highly interesting account of a country ramble with George Meredith, by Sir William Hardman.

of these in a memorable attempt at house-keeping in common. In February of that year Dante Gabriel Rossetti lost his wife, and before its close he took a lease of No. 16 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea; "the conditions under which it was taken had," says Mr Joseph Knight, "no element of possible permanency. Joint occupants with Rossetti were Mr Swinburne, Mr George Meredith, and Mr William Rossetti. That four men of individualities so potent, and, in some senses, so aggressive, or at least assertive, as those of the men named, should be able to live together in closeness of continuous intimacy, from which there was scarcely an escape, was barely conceivable. Mr George Meredith, accordingly, made no long stay. Next after him Mr Swinburne departed."* Foredoomed to failure as such an experiment must have been, it was at least a memorable one, and Mr George Meredith's sojourn at Cheyne Walk makes

yet richer the literary associations of this classic ground.

The year of the Chelsea experiment also saw the publication of Mr Meredith's second volume of poetry, *Modern Love, and Poems of the English Roadside*, and the frank tribute of a younger poet to his elder in Mr Algernon Charles Swinburne's letter of protest to the editor of the *Spectator*. That letter may more fitly be referred to at length when considering the volume which called it forth; here, however, I may point out that Mr Swinburne's words sufficiently show that there were people—fit but few—ready to accord full homage to the genius of the author of *Modern Love*:—

“To any fair attack Mr Meredith's books of course lie as much open as another man's; indeed, standing where he does, the very eminence of his post makes him perhaps more liable than a man of less well-earned fame to the periodical slings and arrows of publicity. . . . Any work of a

man who has won his spurs and fought his way to a foremost place among the men of his time, must claim at least a grave consideration and respect. It would be hardly less absurd, in remarking on a poem by Mr Meredith, to omit all reference to his previous work, and treat the present book as if its author had never tried his hand at such writing before, than to criticise the *Légende des Siècles*, or (coming to a nearer instance) the *Idylls of the King*, without taking into account the relative position of the great English or the greater French poet."

It was to be many years before any measure of popularity was to be accorded to the great poet and novelist, but it is gratifying to know that his genius was more promptly recognised by men of keener insight. It was indeed the usual story—gifted astronomers are aware of the comet long before we can all see it

"Flame in the forehead of the morning sky."

In 1864 was published *Emilia in Eng-*

land,* and in the following year, despite the unsuccess of its original issue, a second edition of *The Shaving of Shagpat* was published as one of a series of "standard editions of popular authors," with a new prefatory note, and "affectionately inscribed to William Hardman of Norbiton Hall." † In 1865, too, came *Rhoda Fleming*, and in the following year *Vittoria* ran serially through the pages of the *Fortnightly Review*, then edited by Mr John Morley. In 1867 this novel was published in three volumes, and towards the end of the same year Mr Morley set out on a visit to America, and during his absence Mr Meredith took editorial charge of the *Fortnightly*, to which during the next year or two he contributed critical notes on new books.

Although still some considerable degree removed from anything which could be called popularity, Mr Meredith's position after the

* Later renamed *Sandra Belloni*, under which title a French translation had appeared.

† Sir William Hardman of the *Morning Post*. See p. 9.

publication of *Vittoria* was such that all his subsequent novels—with the striking exception of the greatest—were originally published as serials in the leading magazines and reviews. From the autumn of 1870 until the close of 1871 *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* were described in the pages of the *Cornhill Magazine*, where they were accompanied by illustrations by George Du Maurier. Near the end of 1871 this novel was published in the old three-volume form, and a second edition was almost immediately called for, showing a distinct advance towards wider recognition. Again came a long pause, for Mr Meredith's carefully-planned, closely-thought-out and brilliantly-written stories could scarcely be produced at the rate of three or four a year, as are those of some popular fiction-manufacturers of the present day. The next novel was *Beauchamp's Career*, which ran (1874-75) through the pages of the *Fortnightly Review*, and was issued in volume form

at the end of 1875, although dated, in accordance with a stupid custom, the following year.

In 1877 Mr Meredith appeared in a new rôle when he made his appearance—for the only time, so far as I am aware—on the lecture platform. This was at the London Institution, where, on February 1, he gave his memorable discourse on the subject of which he, more than any man of his age, is master, that of Comedy. In the following April his lecture was printed in the *New Quarterly Magazine*, entitled *On the Idea of Comedy and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, and nearly twenty years later it was published as a volume by itself. In January of the same year the same magazine had published one of Mr Meredith's rare short stories, *The House on the Beach*. With the exception of *Farina*, one of his earliest essays in fiction, all the short stories belong to this period preceding the production of the author's masterpiece. In July 1879 *The Tale of Chloe* appeared in the

New Quarterly Magazine, and in the following autumn came—*The Egoist*!

This hurried survey of Mr Meredith's working life is not the place in which to enlarge even upon his greatest achievements, but I may fairly point out here that with *The Egoist* he made his place beyond all question assured in the eyes of all true lovers of the best in literature. Nor was it the fault of discriminating critics if the circulating library public still looked askance at the novelist who had so quietly come to the very front rank; for Mr W. E. Henley hailed the new work of genius in four reviews, while James Thomson ("B.V.") was another writer of great ability who let pass no opportunity of doing admiring homage to Mr Meredith. In this very year which saw the publication of *The Egoist*, "Thomson became engaged in a correspondence with Mr George Meredith, for whose genius he had long felt and expressed the utmost admiration; and he had now the great satis-

faction of learning that his own writings were held in high esteem by one whose good opinion he probably valued above that of any living critic. 'I am glad,' wrote Mr Meredith, 'to be in personal communication with you. The pleasant things you have written of me could not be other than agreeable to a writer. I saw that you had the rare deep love of literature; rare at all times and in our present congestion of matter almost extinguished; which led you to recognise any effort to produce the worthiest. But when a friend unmasked your initials, I was flattered. For I had read the "City of Dreadful Night," and to be praised by the author of that poem would strike all men able to form a judgment upon eminent work as a distinction.' " *

A couple of eloquent entries in Thomson's diary for 1879 may also be quoted from Mr Salt's biography of the unhappy poet:—

* *The Life of James Thomson* ("B.V."). By Henry S. Salt. Revised edition, pp. 122 123

“Saturday, Nov. 1.—*Athenæum*; openg. article on *Egoist*. The first critique on any of George Meredith’s books I have ever come across in which the writer showed thorough knowledge of his works, and anything like an adequate apprec. of his wonderful genius.”

“Saturday, Nov. 8.—*Athenæum*, advt. of *Egoist*: Cordial praise from *Athenm.*, *Pall Mall*, *Spectr.*, *Examr.* At length! Encourg.! A man of wonderful genius, and a splendid writer, may hope to obtn. something like recogn. after working hard for thirty years, dating from his majority!”*

In the following year Thomson spent a summer day with Mr Meredith at his residence, Flint Cottage, Box Hill, and described the great poet and novelist as “one of those personalities who need fear no comparisons with their best writings,” and again in September 1881, the poet of the joy of earth and the poet of the sadness of cities

* *The Life of James Thomson* (“*B.V.*”). By Henry S. Salt. Revised edition, p. 126.

had a day together about the beautiful downs which neighbour the creeper-clad cottage that has for so many years been the home of the former. The view from his garden *châlet* Mr Meredith has wonderfully pictured in the third and fourth stanzas of "The Thrush in February."

During 1880-81 *The Tragic Comedians* appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*, and before the close of the former year the story was published separately in two volumes. In 1883, after an interval of twenty years, was published Mr Meredith's third volume of poetry, with the title of *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth*. Two years later, and in the spring of 1885, was published that novel which perhaps more than any other tended to widen the circle of those familiar with any of the writings of its author; this was *Diana of the Crossways*, and one cannot help feeling that popular attention was turned towards it largely because of the rumours that Diana was a fictional repre-

sentation of the Hon. Mrs Norton, that it was in a measure a *roman à clef*.

On September 17, 1885, Mr Meredith's second wife died.

This mid-period of the 'eighties was one which will long be remembered by all interested in the great political struggle in which the Irish demand for Home Rule culminated. It is always interesting to learn the attitude of a man such as our greatest novelist towards a struggle taking place among his contemporaries, and Mr Meredith's sympathies are too strong, his reasoning too logical, his insight too acute, for him not to come to his definite conclusion on such a subject as that which then tried men's souls, and we learn from Mr Barry O'Brien that the poet spoke with no uncertain voice. As he has put it, he is half Irish himself, his mother having been an Irishwoman :—

“ Why is not something done to inform the public mind on Home Rule? I admit the

necessity of agitation, but you want something besides. Having blazed on the English lines with the artillery of agitation, you ought to charge them with the cavalry of facts."

When the great Parnell Commission was in progress, a few years later, Mr Meredith took the keenest interest in the proceedings and frequently visited the law courts, and, as Mr Justin M'Carthy has told us in his *Reminiscences*, "it seems almost unnecessary to say that his keen intellect was not taken in for a single moment by the grotesque forgeries of the unhappy Pigott. As a rule Meredith had no part in politics and showed no desire even to enter into talk on political subjects; but he took a deep interest in the progress of that extraordinary inquiry, and attended the sittings of the court day after day. He usually sat in one of the seats just behind the leading members of the Bar; and his handsome, intellectual face caused many an inquiry among those who habitually attended the sittings of the court, and who

never thought of seeing the secluded novelist, the man known to them only by the fame of his books, among the occupants of the foremost benches in that court of strange political investigation. More than one of the leading advocates in that historic trial was moved for a moment into forgetfulness of the task in which he was engaged by the news that George Meredith was sitting just behind him."

In 1887 an article on Mr Meredith's writing appeared in an American magazine, and the novelist wrote a highly-interesting letter to the writer of the essay, in which he gave some important particulars as to his method in preparing his novels. The letter has been printed two or three times, but is well worth reproducing again here:—

“ENGLAND—BOX HILL, DORKING,
“*July 22, 1887.*”

“MY DEAR SIR,—When, at the conclusion of your article on my works, you say that a certain change in public taste, should it come

about, will be to some extent due to me, you hand me the flowering wreath I covet. For I think that all right use of life, and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us; and as to my works, I know them faulty, and think them of worth only where they point and aid to that end. Close knowledge of our fellows, discernment of the laws of existence, these lead to great civilisation. I have supposed that the novel, exposing and illustrating the natural history of man, may help us to such sustaining roadside gifts. But I have never started on a novel to pursue the theory it developed. The dominant idea in my mind took up the characters and the story midway.

“You say that there are few scenes? Is it so throughout? My method has been to prepare my readers for a crucial exhibition of the *personæ*, and then to give the scene in the fullest of the blood and brain under stress of a fiery situation.

“Concerning style, thought is tough, and

dealing with thought produces toughness. Or when strong emotion is in tide against the active mind, there is perforce confusion. Have you found that scenes of simple emotion or plain narrative were hard to view? When their author revised for the new edition, his critical judgment approved those passages. Yet you are not to imagine that he holds his opinion combatively against his critics. The verdict is with the observer.

“In the Comedies, and here and there where a concentrated presentment is in design, you find a ‘pitch’ considerably above our common human; and purposely, for only in such a manner could so much be shown. Those high notes and condensings are abandoned when the strong human call is heard—I beg you to understand merely that such was my intention.

“Again, when you tell me that Harvard has the works, and that Young Harvard reads them, the news is of a kind to

prompt me to fresh productiveness and higher. In England I am encouraged but by a few enthusiasts. I read in a critical review of some verses of mine the other day that I was 'a harlequin and a performer of antics.' I am accustomed to that kind of writing, as our hustings orator is to the dead cat and the brickbat flung in his face—at which he smiles politely; and I too; but after many years of it my mind looks elsewhere. Adieu to you.—Most faithfully yours,

“GEORGE MEREDITH.”

Each year that carried the nineteenth century nearer to its close saw the “few enthusiasts” of whom Mr Meredith here wrote considerably increased in numbers if we may judge by the greater frequency with which articles and notes on his writings were met with in the papers, and by the fact that it became less common to meet fiction readers who knew nothing

of the writings of one of our first masters of the art of fiction. In the year in which this instance of transatlantic appreciation of his genius reached him, and when he declared himself prompted to "fresh productiveness and higher," Mr Meredith published a new volume of poetry, his *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life*, and towards the end of 1888 came another, *A Reading of Earth*.

In 1888 a weekly journal named *The Reflector* had a brief life under the editorship of the brilliant young parodist, James Kenneth Stephen, who died at the early age of thirty-three, a few years later. Here it is of interest as containing a poem by Mr Meredith prefaced by an amusing letter. The occasion which called forth the letter was that, in the number of the journal for January 29, there appeared in the advertisement columns the following notice:—

"The gentleman who recently asked a

younger man what the dickens he expected to come to if he started in life as a Tory is referred to the precedent of Mr Gladstone."

In the following issue of *The Reflector* it was made plain that the speakers referred to were Mr Meredith and J. K. S., for the letter which I have mentioned ran :—

"SIR,—The senior (see your advertisement columns) who met that young Joseph Hofmann of politics, with the question as to the future of the youthful Tory, is impressed by *The Reflector's* repartee, in which he desires to find a very hopeful promise, that may presently dispel strange images of the prodigy growing onionly, and showing a seedy head when one appears. Meanwhile, he sends you a lyric out of many addressed encouragingly to certain tramps, who are friends of his, for the purpose of driving a breath of the country through your

pages, though he has no design of competing with the exquisite twitter of the triolets of the French piano which accompanied your birth and bids fair to sound your funeral notes.—Yours, etc.,

“GEORGE MEREDITH.”

In 1892 the authors of England showed their appreciation of Mr Meredith's genius by selecting him to succeed Lord Tennyson as President of the Incorporated Society of Authors, and it is obviously fitting that our greatest living master of the pen should occupy the position which he does. In this year he published *The Empty Purse and Other Poems*. In 1894 came *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*, which ran serially through the *Pall Mall Magazine*, and a volume containing three short stories which had appeared before. A year later was published *The Amazing Marriage*, and in 1896 Constable's began the issue of his collected works. During this year Mr

Meredith gave fresh evidence of his sympathy with those engaged in the struggle against oppression or tyranny by subscribing to the memorial to the notable Russian writer and refugee, Sergius Stepniak, who had recently been killed on the railway.

On February 12, 1898, Mr Meredith attained his seventieth year, and his birthday was made the fitting occasion for a representative body of authors to address him in admiring homage:—

“ TO GEORGE MEREDITH :

“ Some comrades in letters who have long valued your work send you a cordial greeting upon your seventieth birthday.

“ You have attained the first rank in literature, after many years of inadequate recognition. From first to last you have been true to yourself, and have always aimed at the highest mark. We are rejoiced to know that merits once perceived by only a few are now appreciated by a

wide and steadily-growing circle. We wish you many years of life, during which you may continue to do good work, cheered by the consciousness of good work already achieved, and encouraged by the certainty of a hearty welcome from many sympathetic readers.

“(Signed) J. M. Barrie, Walter Besant, Augustine Birrell, James Bryce, Austin Dobson, Conan Doyle, Edmund Gosse, R. B. Haldane, Thomas Hardy, Frederic Harrison, ‘John Oliver Hobbes,’ Henry James, R. C. Jebb, Andrew Lang, W. E. H. Lecky, M. Londin, F. W. Maitland, Alice Meynell, John Morley, F. W. H. Myers, James Payn, Frederick Pollock, Annie Thackeray Ritchie, Henry Sidgwick, Leslie Stephen, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Mary A. Ward, G. F. Watts, Theodore Watts-Dunton, Wolseley.”

Acknowledging this tribute, Mr Meredith wrote in reply to Mr Leslie Stephen saying :—

“The recognition that I have always worked honestly to my best, coming from the men and women of the highest distinction, touches me deeply. Pray let it be known to them how much they encourage and support me.”

In 1898 Mr Meredith's collected *Poems* were issued, and a new volume, *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History*, was published, then in the spring of 1901 *A Reading of Life, with Other Poems*, first delighted his admirers and proved that inspiration still comes to the honoured veteran, and that despite ill health his fancy is as quick, his intellect as keen as ever.

In the summer of 1900 several members of the White Friars Club visited Mr Meredith at Flint Cottage, and one of their number sent to the *Westminster Gazette* a note on the event, from which a passage may be borrowed, giving as it

does a lively idea of the great poet-novelist at home:—

“Despite his physical feebleness, Mr Meredith, who was accompanied by his charming daughter, advanced to meet his guests, as, despite protest, he saw them to his outer gate at the close of the visit. While in dress and spirits Mr Meredith half suggested the Frenchman, in the liveliness of his wit and the sunniness of his reception he proved the truth of an observation he let fall as to the Irish—‘above all,’ he remarked, ‘they have charming manners’—for in welcoming a popular writer (‘He hath Irish in his eye!’ he exclaimed) he explained that he was half Irish, his mother being Irish. One or two visitors, having Mr Meredith’s intricacies of style vividly fixed in their minds, had gone as to the sight of a quarry of Northern granite; all quit with slow-foot as if they were closing a happy holiday on the Riviera. His courtliness,

his 'instinctive keen glance,' the amazing brightness of his conversation, the flood-like flow of his language, his jocosity, his almost boyish joyousness—in short, the exceptional personal charm and 'rattle' of the man—made captive all hearts. Mr Meredith, as well as his daughter, was unmistakably touched by the homage of his visitors; while the White Friars, in their turn, departed lingeringly, as one glances back again and again upon a beautiful scene or a fascinating figure—in this instance beautiful scene and fascinating figure being in combination, the exceptional reluctance to return to the normal outlook upon average people and ordinary scenes needed no excuse: 'for to the remembrance it seemed magical.'"

I cannot conclude this chapter better than by giving from the pen of a distinguished novelist and politician some passages de-

scriptive of the personal impression made upon him by Mr Meredith. The passages are from the entertaining *Reminiscences* of Mr Justin McCarthy, and give a picture of the great writer not unlike that which we conjure up from a knowledge of him through his works. "I think the first impression which George Meredith made on me" (wrote Mr McCarthy) "was that of extraordinary and exuberant vitality. When I saw him for the first time, he had left his younger days a long way behind him, and yet he had the appearance and movements of one endowed with a youth that could not fade; energy was in every movement; vital power spoke in every gesture. He loved bodily exercises of all kinds; he delighted to take long brisk walks—'spins,' as he called them—along the highways and byways of the neighbourhood; and he loved to wander through the woods, and to lie in the grass, and I have no doubt he would have enjoyed climbing the trees. He seemed to have in

him much of the temperament of the faun ; he seemed to have sprung from the very bosom of Nature herself. His talk was wonderful, and, perhaps, not the least wonderful thing about it was that it seemed so very like his writing. . . . Meredith, as I have said, loved all manner of bodily exercises ; and, indeed, it amazed me when I first used to visit him, to see a man, no longer young, indulge in such feats of strength and agility. It delighted him to play with great iron weights, and to throw heavy clubs into the air and catch them as they fell, and twirl them round his head as if they had been light bamboo canes. I remember wondering, indeed, sometimes, whether such exercises and such feats of strength were not taxing too far the physical powers of a man who had already passed his prime, and whether over-taxed Nature would not show some day that she had been taxed too far. But at the same time, the general im-

pression which George Meredith then gave one was that of the faun-like creature, the child of Nature who must always be young."

II

THE POET

“Enter these enchanted woods
You who dare.”

The Woods of Westermain.

ON one occasion when hotly championing the cause of Mr Meredith in a brief after-dinner discussion on living novelists, now some years ago—a discussion in which I felt that his merits were receiving far from their due share of attention—I happened to say that he was none the less great as a novelist for being great as a poet, when the “funny man” of the gathering chimed in with, “Perhaps that is why we can’t understand him.” The remark was received with some applause by those who preferred the simple sensationalism—religious, amatory, or bloody

—of the approved circulating library fiction to the life-revealing, thought-packed, wit-irradiated work of the author of *The Egoist*; and it was not only applauded, but really seemed to some of those present to be a sufficiently adequate explanation of Meredithian “difficulty” — the highest poetry being commonly distasteful and therefore “difficult” reading.

That the novelist is poet also is manifested in almost everything which he has written, but in this chapter I wish to touch upon the poetry which he has given to us in more or less orthodox approved poetic forms,—where the poet has shaped the language as well as conceived the thought. And here it may be noted that Mr Meredith has written of himself “as one loving poetry wherever I can find it, and of any kind,” and again—

“To light and song my yearning aimed.”

I begin my appreciation by a consideration of the poetry, then, because it seems to me

that it is perhaps the most characteristic expressions of George Meredith's genius, in which we have at once his marvellous sense of the beautiful—and his still more wonderful power of interpreting it—his rapidity of intellectual insight and his remarkable capacity for subjecting language to thought. Chronologically, too, the poetry demands attention first, for, as I have pointed out in the preceding chapter, it was as poet that Mr Meredith first made his appearance in print over fifty years ago, when he contributed "Chillianwallah" to *Chambers's Journal* in July 1849. His earliest volume, too, published a couple of years later, was *Poems*.

In setting at the head of this chapter the two opening lines of "The Woods of Westermain," I am thinking of the way in which that remarkable poem may be wrested to a symbolical meaning, as indicating some of the best work of its author. Take up the two volumes of the collected *Poems*, and

you may at once enter Poetry's own woods of Westermain :—

“ You with them may gather ripe
Pleasures flowing not from purse.
Quick and far as Colour flies
Taking the delighted eyes,
You of any well that springs
May unfold the heaven of things ;
Have it homely and within,
And thereof its likeness win,
Will you so in soul's desire :
This do sages grant t' the lyre.”

The thought expressed in the penultimate line of that passage is repeated later on in the same poem when the poet declares— and it is as true in the realm of poetry as in that of nature—

“ Burn to see, you need but seek.”

The eye sees that which it brings with it the power of seeing, said Goethe, and most assuredly the mind, capable of recognising the beauties of thought, crystallised in the language of poetry, will find a plenitude of them in the two volumes with which I am

here mainly concerned. I say the two volumes because it is in the collected *Poems* published in 1898 that most readers will make acquaintance with this side of Mr Meredith's work. For the collector, or for those discerning lovers of what is good in literature who acquired them as they were issued, there are several slim volumes published since the original volume of 1851. The greater parts of these are embodied in the collected *Poems*. Those pieces which the author has seen fit to reject, or has not chosen to collect, may yet, it is to be hoped, be gathered into a third volume.

It is not my intention to go through the riches of these two books *seriatim*, appraising and comparing or roughly classifying them; nor do I aspire to join the ranks of the mere cataloguers who briefly mention piece after piece with a few lines to each as though they were preparing a catalogue for use in the hall of Fame. I wish rather to insist upon some of the more striking

characteristics of Mr Meredith's poetry, and to show by extracted gems—but roughly set in the contrasting medium of my dull prose—how great a store of riches is here at the command of all who can bring to their reading the power of appreciating that which is most precious in literature. In doing this I may be running counter to some accepted ideas in the province of criticism, for exposition, Mr John Morley has declared, is not wanted for well-known living writers; such generalisation is, however, untrue when it comes to the case of a well-known writer who is only partially understood, and therefore but inadequately appreciated. Some of Robert Browning's work, for example, certainly needed exposition during the poet's lifetime simply because too many people were ready to neglect his work altogether on the ground that some of it deserved to be labelled "hard reading." Precisely the same thing applies in the case of the subject of this volume.

Here is a poet who has written of man and of nature with extraordinary insight and with an almost unique power of expression, the whole of whose work is made to suffer in the minds of all too many readers because some of his poems are "difficult reading." We might as well refuse to read *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet* because we cannot fathom all the secrets of the *Sonnets*, or *Pippa Passes* because bothered by *Sordello*, as ignore four-fifths of Mr Meredith's poetry because of the difficulty of the rest.

In his collected *Poems* Mr Meredith has not unwisely placed first his *Modern Love*, his most sustained poetic achievement and one that of itself would suffice to place him among the masters of his time. *Modern Love* is a sequence of fifty sixteen-line poems which are sonnets in everything but the fact of their extension by one-seventh beyond the "scanty plot of ground" allotted by use and wont to the sonnet. Their spirit is, however, so essentially that of the sonnet

that we may throw mere conventionalism to the winds and boldly call them such. The boldness of this—although it is but following in the steps of no less doughty a pioneer than Mr Algernon Charles Swinburne—will be the more apparent when it becomes necessary to place *Modern Love* among the world's great sonnet sequences. *Modern Love* has a more or less definite story to tell and may be described as a novel taken up at the point where a prose fictionist generally leaves off. It is tragic in its deep intensity, and has cleverly been described by James Thomson (B.V.) as “a series of Rembrandt etchings for sombre intensity and concision.” Unlike the novels by the same author, which so often open with a more or less involved introduction, the poem begins abruptly :—

“By this he knew she wept with waking eyes :
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed,
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,

And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
 Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay
 Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away
 With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes
 Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
 Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
 Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
 Were moveless, looking through their dead black years
 By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
 Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between ;
 Each wishing for the sword that severs all."

The story is one of soul-tragedy :—

" In tragic life, God wot,
 No villain need be ! Passions spin the plot."

The husband believes the love of his wife to be alienated from him, and yet while eating his heart out with jealousy and pain cannot but still love where he has loved—

" Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask."

Everything reminds the man of what has been and makes him feel more poignantly the horror of what is, his varying moods

and thoughts being finely translated in the poems. Then we have the twentieth sonnet with its striking opening :—

“I am not of those miserable males
Who sniff at vice, and, daring not to snap,
Do therefore hope for heaven,”

and its notable close when the husband finds an old “wanton scented-tress,” and, comparing his own past with his wife’s present, says—

“If for those times I must ask charity,
Have I not any charity to give?”

So they go on “league-sundered by the silent gulf between,” their task made the heavier by the fact that friends will look upon them as the very embodiment of wedded love—they are asked for their blessing on a pair about to venture upon the seas of matrimony, and visiting at a crowded country house, they

“can but get,
An attic-crib. Such lovers will not fret
At that, it is half said.”

With the twenty-fifth sonnet comes a capital stroke. She has been reading a French novel and dislikes it as unnatural. Why? he asks; the story is of "the usual three, husband, and wife, and lover," and when it comes to a final choice,

"She does choose;
And takes her husband, like a proper wife.
Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:
And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse."

Sick at heart he visits his doctor, and the oracle of medicine prescribes distraction; love denied him at home, he seeks a mistress and finds disillusionment again:—

"A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave
Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.
But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,
And eat our pot of honey on the grave."

The differentiation of kisses here is unforgettable; the lines are instinct with genius. He wakes one morning to find her gone.

“Then I rose,
And my disordered brain did guide my foot
To that old wood where our first love-salute
Was interchanged.”

He finds her there with another, but goes up and proffers his arm.

“She took it simply, with no rude alarm ;
And that disturbing shadow passed reprovèd.”

Then comes “the pure daylight of honest speech,” and he learns that she too has been jealous of his love for another :—

“Jealous devotion bade her break the mesh,
That I might seek that other like a bird.”

And so we come to an end of the sequence with a sonnet, the closing lines of which are magnificently descriptive of the sea :—

“Thus piteously Love closed what he begat :
The union of this ever-diverse pair !
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.

Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
They wandered once ; clear as the dew on flowers :
But they fed not on the advancing hours :
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life !—
In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore !”

There is something particularly sad in the dominating thought of “this great processional poem” (as Mr Swinburne has called it)—the thought that two who love, and love deeply, may yet be fatally severed by the very intensity of their passion and their inability to “speak out.” The tragedy is probably a commoner one than most people would care to admit, and in recording it Mr Meredith has had the opportunity of uttering some of the finest things in modern poetry. Each part of the great processional is essentially a

sonnet in its self-contained thought and beauty, and though technically it cannot be called a sonnet sequence we find ourselves insensibly ranging it with such noble work as Rossetti's *House of Life*, although the styles of the two poets are widely different. It has indeed been said by one critic*—and many lovers of poetry will agree with him—that these two sequences are “among the very finest legacies of poetic genius left to us in the latter half of the nineteenth century.”

In the very same year that saw the publication of the tragic *Modern Love* a widely different poet was working on the same theme and was treating it from a widely different standpoint. The poet was Henrik Ibsen and the work was the *Comedy of Love*, wherein the author bitterly satirised the subject of marriage for love :—

* Mr William Sharp in an article in *Good Words*, July 1899.

"Use your experience ; look around in life—
 Each pair of lovers takes for creed and psalter
 That millions came to them as man and wife.
 They gallop harum scarum to the altar ;
 They make a home, spoiled pets of happiness
 A space goes by in faith-intoxication ;
 At length a day of reckoning dawns ! ah ! yes
 And proves mere bankruptcy their jubilation.
 Bankrupt the flower of youth on matron's cheek ;
 Bankrupt the bloom of thought within her mind ;
 Bankrupt the husband's courage ; tame and meek
 Each flame that once flew blazing on the wind ;
 Bankrupt the whole condition of affairs,
 Yet still they're quoted on the Bourse of pairs,
 A first-class firm of love, the best you'll find." *

The last two lines remind us irresistibly of the couple in *Modern Love* who, "league-sundered by the silent gulf between," are yet spoken of by their friends as the very embodiment of wedded love.

The art of the pen, Mr Meredith has finely said, "is to arouse the inward vision, instead of labouring with a drop-scene brush, as if it were to the eye ;

* As Englished by Mr Edmund Gosse.

because our flying minds cannot contain a protracted description. That is why the poets who spring imagination with a word or a phrase paint lasting pictures." This springing the imagination with a word or phrase is just what the poet of *Modern Love* does with such marvellous sureness. If we turn to his other poems we find the same flashing insight exercised in regard to other human relations, as we have in this sequence on the doubting married lovers. He has a lesson to read to his country as a whole—a country that he fears may drift to ruin in a state of drunkenness—the drunkenness that comes of wealth. This lesson he gives in "Aneurin's Harp," one of the stirring *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life*, and it is shrewdly put in the three closing stanzas:—

"Joined we are ; a tide of races
Rolloed to meet a common fate ;
England clasps in her embraces
Many : what is England's state ?

England her distended middle
 Thumps with pride as Mammon's wife ;
 Says that thus she reads thy riddle,
 Heaven ! 'tis heaven to plump her life.
 O my Bard ! a yellow liquor,
 Like to that we drank of old—
 Gold is her metheglin beaker,
 She destruction drinks in gold.
 Warn her, Bard, that Power is pressing
 Hotly for his dues this hour ;
 Tell her that no drunken blessing
 Stops the onward march of Power.

Has she ears to take forewarnings
 She will cleanse her of her stains,
 Feed and speed for braver mornings
 Valourously the growth of brains.
 Power, the hard man knit for action,
 Reads each nation on the brow.
 Cripple, fool, and petrification,
 Fall to him—are falling now !”

Perhaps the poet thinks that it is with the nation as with the man :—

“ We spend our lives in learning pilotage,
 And grow good steersmen when the vessel's crank !”

“ Necessity,” as he has said in another poem, “ is the primal goad to growth.”

It is to the poets that we go for such comfort as the words and thoughts of others can give us when vexed and torn by the world-long problems of whence and whither, and by the sorrow of loss; most of the greater poets can give hope and sustainment when our faith is on trial, even though it be but in the magnificent defiant egotism of Mr Henley's:—

“ Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.”

When we turn to Mr Meredith's utterances we find an optimism no less exhilarating, if slightly reminiscent of George Eliot's "Choir Invisible" in "The Question Whither,"—

“ When we have thrown off this old suit,
So much in need of mending,
To sink among the naked mute,
Is that, think you, our ending ?

We follow many, more we lead,
And you who sadly turf us,
Believe not that all living seed
Must flower above the surface. .

Enough if we have winked to sun,
Have sped the plough a season ;
There is a soul for labour done,
Endureth fixed as reason.
Then let our trust be firm in Good,
Though we be of the fasting ;
Our questions are a mortal brood,
Our work is everlasting. . . .”

Then, too, there is in *A Reading of Earth* that beautiful utterance of poignant grief, “A Faith on Trial” a poem full of such consolation as man can offer to man in his most trying hour and full of that sense of our oneness with nature which runs through so much of Mr Meredith’s poetry. Here again and again will be found words and phrases calculated to “spring imagination,” and through all a sense of personal intimacy that seems to make it sacrilege to tear any of the lines

from their context. The opening passage sufficiently points the autobiographical character of the poem :—

“On the morning of May,
Ere the children had entered my gate
With their wreaths and mechanical lay,
A metal ding-dong of the date !
I mounted our hill, bearing heart
That had little of life save its weight :
The crowned Shadow poising dart
Hung over her : she, my own,
My good companion, mate,
Pulse of me : she who had shown
Fortitude quiet as Earth’s
At the shedding of leaves.”

The poem is instinct with beauty throughout and contains in the passage on “the pure wild cherry in bloom” one of the sweetest word pictures in the language. We may call the poem pantheistic in its glorification of the Earth and all that is hers, we may not feel the sustainment which the poet felt in his sublime “reading,” but if we have eyes

and ears for beauty, if we have minds capable of appreciating creation by words, we cannot fail to recognise in "A Faith on Trial" one of the highest poetic expressions made by that unorthodox faith which the orthodox call doubt.

There is so much of a fine indication of the subtle influence of nature on a sensitive poetical mind in this poem that it is only fitting to follow up mention of it with a few words on Mr Meredith's nature poetry generally, and this same nature poetry is one of the most marked characteristics of the whole body of his work.

"No Paradise is lost for them
Who foot by branching root and stem
And lightly with the woodland share
The change of night and day."

A sense of the beauty and significance of our natural surroundings is largely a development of the nineteenth century—or at least a reversion to what obtained

before the formal fashions of the eighteenth century. Here periods are of course but loosely named, for the real renaissance of nature poetry began before the nineteenth century, as may be witnessed most strongly in the works of Cowper and of Burns. Still, its true development followed them, until every later poet of distinction has treated man more or less in relation to nature as a whole and not as a kind of extravagance set amid wholly alien surroundings on an earth with which he has no real and intimate connection. With the fuller recognition of man's position as part of nature has come a fuller sense of the beauty of other natural manifestations, and that sense has never better been put in words than in certain passages in the poetry of Mr Meredith.

Take, for example, that most joyous poem to "The Lark Ascending." Wonderful always in the felicity of his metre and language as a nature poet, in this piece

Mr Meredith has contributed to the world's literature a veritable triumph of wedded language and thought. We are not so much reading the poem as experiencing in our inner consciousness the very song of the crested singer as he rises tremulously up and up,

"Till lost on his aërial rings
In light."

The rush of thought and music—now half pausing and then on again full, rich and

"on the jet sustained
Without a break, without a fall,
Sweet-silvery, sheer lyrical,"

is the most marvellous adaptation of language to natural music that I know; far, far more remarkable, because at once so much more spontaneous and so much more sustained, than Tennyson's better-known "Throstle Song." It is almost impossible to read the poem without reading it aloud, and to read it aloud is at once to feel the

magic of it, even though the voice gives out before the end of the first stopless stanza of over sixty lines. In that opening passage, by the way, occurs a striking metaphor, giving evidence of the acutest observation :—

“ And every face to watch him raised,
Puts on the light of children praised.”

Nothing but a lengthy extract can give a hint of the quality on which I have laid such stress, and this extract shall be the following beautiful summing-up of the joy of the lark's song :—

“ For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup,
And he the wine which overflows
To lift us with him as he goes :
The woods and brooks, the sheep and kine,
He is, the hills, the human line,
The meadows green, the fallows brown,
The dreams of labour in the town ;

He sings the sap, the quickened veins ;
The wedding song of sun and rains
He is, the dance of children, thanks
Of sowers, shouts of primrose-banks,
And eye of violets while they breathe ;
All these the circling song will wreathe,
And you shall hear the herb and tree,
The bitter heart of men shall see,
Shall feel celestially, as long
As you crave nothing save the song.

Was never voice of ours could say
Our inmost in the sweetest way,
Like yonder voice aloft, and link
All hearers in the song they drink.
Our wisdom speaks from failing blood,
Our passion is too full in flood,
We want the key of his wild note
Of truthful in a tuneful throat,
The song seraphically free
Of taint of personality,
So pure that it salutes the suns
The voice of one for millions,
In whom the millions rejoice
For giving their one spirit voice."

Shelley's magnificent lyric "To a Skylark," with all its joyous exultation, is not greater than this to "The Lark Ascending." Then,

too, in another poem, strongly contrasting in its theme with that which I have just instanced, we have the poet singing of the value of "Hard Weather" as a tonic force. The poem may be described as being in parts "hard reading," but the fineness of many of its descriptive passages, the wholesomeness of its teaching are beyond all question. It is bracing and invigorating, and is indeed a fine setting in words of what is commonly described as having the cobwebs blown out of us; it is fitting that we should wrestle with elemental force at times, that we should breast the biting wind and, struggling against it, feel the better for the encounter:—

"Behold the life at ease; it drifts.

The sharpened life commands its course."

And again towards the end of the poem we have a suggestion of the theory of the survival of the most fit:—

"Earth yields the milk, but all her mind
Is vowed to thresh for finer stock."

Through these two volumes it is the same over and over again; the poet is like the Daughter of Hades of his own poem:—

“Of the glory of Light she sang,
She sang of the rapture of Breath.”

Man is not foreign to but part of nature and with his higher attributes should certainly be no less spontaneously happy than the animals and plants which he is prone to look down upon. Life is not a trial and a journey, but a manifestation of happiness in its very possession. We are too self-centred, too neglectful of all other forms of life, except in so far as they subserve our grosser needs, and we pay the penalty:—

“Never in woods
Ran white insanity fleeing itself: all sane
The woods revolve.”

Which reminds us of a famous passage in Walt Whitman.

But again the poet's lesson rings true,

you must learn to see before you *can* see ;
 before you can in the smallest degree walk
 the earth with the observing eye, the
 assimilative soul of the poet or of that
 “ Melampus ” of whom he says :—

“ With love exceeding a simple love of the things
 That glide in grasses and rubble of woody wreck ;
 Or change their perch on a beat of quivering wings
 From branch to branch, only restful to pipe and peck ;
 Or, bristled, curl at a touch their snouts in a ball ;
 Or cast their web between bramble and thorny hook ;
 The good physician Melampus, loving them all,
 Among them walked, as a scholar who reads a book.

For him the woods were a home and gave him the key
 Of knowledge, thirst for their treasures in herbs and
 flowers.

The secrets held by the creatures nearer than we
 To earth he sought, and the link of their life with
 ours :

And where alike we are, unlike where, and the veined
 Division, veined parallel, of a blood that flows
 In them, in us, from the source by man unattained
 Save marks he well what the mystical woods disclose.”

Well would it be if doubting humanity
 would better take to heart the lesson

which the poet so clearly transcribes from the woodland he knows and loves so thoroughly:—

“And this the woodland saith :
I know not hope or fear ;
I take whate'er may come ;
I raise my head to aspects fair,
From foul I turn away.”

But enough of man's oneness with nature—a theme on which Mr Meredith has much to say in all his poetry but chiefly in that fascinating series of poems which were originally published under the title of *A Reading of Earth*. The teaching, if it is to be summed up in a word which is never a very satisfactory procedure, may be described as a kind of hedonistic-pantheism—the pleasure which comes of knowing Nature intimately and of realising our oneness with her. There is another aspect of Mr Meredith's poetry of nature which also calls for more than passing comment. It is his remarkable faculty for describing natural

effects. Take the second and third stanzas of "The Appeasement of Demeter," describing a state of famine, when

"Demeter devastated our good land,
In blackness for her daughter snatched below. . . .

Necessity, the primal goad to growth,
Stood shrunken ; Youth and Age appeared as one ;
Like Winter Summer ; good as labour sloth ;
Nor was there answer wherefore beamed the sun,
Or why men drew the breath to carry pain.
High reared the ploughshare, broken lay the wain,
 Idly the flax-wheel spun
Unridered : starving lords were wasp and moth.

Lean grassblades losing green on their bent flags,
Sang chilly to themselves ; lone honey-bees
Pursued the flowers that were not with dry bags ;
Sole sound aloud the snap of sapless trees,
More sharp than slingstones on hard breastplates hurled.
Back to first chaos tumbled the stopped world,
 Careless to lure or please.
A nature of gaunt ribs, an Earth of crags."

The effect of famine and devastation is heightened in succeeding stanzas until there comes the happy close, when Demeter laughs once more :—

“Uprose the blade in green, the leaf in red,
 The tree of water and the tree of wood :
 And soon among the branches overhead
 Gave beauty juicy issue sweet for food.
 O Laughter ! beauty plumped and love had birth.
 Laughter ! O thou reviver of sick Earth !
 Good for the spirit, good
 For body, thou ! to both art wine and bread !”

Who that has once read it can forget the picture of the water-rat cleaning himself as given in “An Old Chartist ?” or that of the wild cherry in bloom to which I have already referred ? or that beautiful lyrical welcome to the “Thrush in February ?”

Not, then, of the Nature-worshippers who forget Humanity is Mr Meredith, and his more pointed reference to the close inter-threading of nature with mankind is to be found in his sonnet entitled “Earth’s Secret,” a sonnet which may stand here as representative of a striking series :—

“Not solitarily in fields we find
 Earth’s secret open, though one page is there ;

Her plainest, such as children spell, and share
With bird and beast ; raised letters for the blind.
Not where the troubled passions toss the mind,
In turbid cities, can the key be bare.
It hangs for those who hither thither fare,
Close interthreading nature with our kind.
They, hearing History speak, of what men were,
And have become, are wise. The gain is great
In vision and solidity ; it lives.
Yet at a thought of life apart from her,
Solidity and vision lose their state,
For Earth, that gives the milk, the spirit gives."

This sonnet serves as a natural transition from the treatment of Mr Meredith's nature poetry to that in which he treats of men and of human passions, and here, again, we find a wide range of subject and treatment, from those of the death of the fair-haunting juggler to those of the idyllic "Love in the Valley," or from those of "Three Singers to Young Blood" to the "Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt." The first of the poems I have named is "Juggling Jerry," a brief masterpiece, a little epic of the roadside, giving the brave, dying words of the old juggler.

Simple and direct in its pathos, it is almost impossible to read it carefully with dry eyes. And yet our tears are not tears of pain, but rather of homage to the brave soul calm in the face of the great Juggler Death, and to the genius who has created him immortally dying—

“Yes, my old girl! and it’s no use crying :
 Juggler, constable, king, must bow.
 One that outjuggles all’s been spying
 Long to have me, and he has me now.”

It is a neat stroke that the old man, in giving his version of the platitude that “sceptre and crown must tumble down,” should mention the constable, the embodiment of power as he has met him, before naming the far off monarch. His tribute to humanity, and more especially to women, is admirably true :—

“I’ve studied men from my topsy-turvy
 Close, and, I reckon, rather true.
 Some are fine fellows : some, right scurvy :
 Most, a dash between the two.

But it's a woman, old girl, that makes me
Think more kindly of the race :
And it's a woman, old girl, that shakes me
When the Great Juggler I must face."

The end of the poem, too, where the dying juggler recalls a sight long since seen of a couple of gulls flying over the waves, one of which was suddenly shot, is particularly striking, with its intensely pathetic application. In the poem which immediately succeeds it in the collected edition we have another piece, "The Old Chartist," in which the author has obviously delighted in limning a strong old man, a strenuous fighter against circumstance, one who might have echoed Mr Henley's heroic words—

"Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed."

This old man, who has suffered transportation for the outspokenness of his opinions, returns to his native country to "see the grain," being one of those admirable philosophers

who recognise that, to use his own words, "If you see well you're king of what you see." The old Chartist muses upon his past, and declares himself still unbeaten and ready to rouse the people up again were it not for the fact that "home's where different politics jar most." His "fair daughter," married to a young linen-draper, has no liking for the old man's views, and bluntly intimates that he is their disgrace, and the old Chartist, musing over his position, watches a water-rat sitting at the stream-side assiduously washing himself—

"As if he thought to pass from black to white,
Like parson into lawny bishop,"

and in describing it gives us a verbal witticism unlooked for in its context. The old Chartist does not watch master rat for nothing, for, as he says,—

"You teach me a fine lesson, my old boy !

I've looked on my superiors far too long,

And small has been my profit as my joy.

You've done the right while I've denounced the wrong.

Prosper me later !
Like you, I will despise the sniggering throng,
And please myself and my Creator.
I'll bring the linen-draper and his wife
Some day to see you ; taking off my hat.
Should they ask why, I'll answer : in my life
I never found so true a democrat.
Base occupation
Can't rob you of your own esteem, old rat !
I'll preach you to the British nation."

Here we get a happy instance of the poet using his observation of what are called small matters to great ends.

The poems which I have cited are direct and understandable enough, and are representative of the greatest part of Mr Meredith's poetical work, but it remains to say something of the "difficult" parts of the same work. Mr Meredith has been charged with attempting to make English verse something other than it is, with seeking out-of-the-way rhymes at the cost of both music and clarity of expression, and with other literary sins. Such charges have been brought by those

folk who are ever ready to criticise a writer who shows marked individuality ; who blame a poet for not being like his poetical forebears, instead of criticising him purely for what he is. What we find in much of the poetical work produced during the latter half of his career by Mr Meredith is an involvedness of expression—often combined with a skipping of intermediate phrases in an argument—which makes it by no means easy to get at his meaning ; it is as though the poet had written the matter down as it came to his mind without attempting to spell it out, so to speak, that it should be more readily understood ^{stood} of his readers.

Other qualities are here, too, in lavish variety. In “The Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt” we have a rich irradiation of humour ; in some of the “Ballads of Tragic Life” we have the simple intensity of the old ballad literature combined with, at times, an irritating vagueness of story all their own. “The Nuptials of Attila” is a

magnificent reading of history. "The Three Singers to Young Blood"—passion, prudence and love—is a delightful brief trilogy containing, for who so wills to see it, sage advice, the fruit of close observation. "The Orchard and the Heath" presents a couple of contrasted landscapes in words; in the first the poet sees a group of merry children in a ripening apple orchard, in the second a number of children round a gipsy encampment fire and a provender pot. Wonderful is the descriptive power evidenced in such stanzas as this on the gipsy girls starting a race:—

"Three girls, with shoulders like a boat at sea
 Tipped sideways by the wave (their clothing slid
 From either ridge unequally),
 Lean, swift and voluble, bestrid
 A starting point, unfrocked to the bent knee."

In "Love is Winged," "Ask is Love Divine" and "Joy is Fleet" we have three lyric gems which are likely to shine in the anthologies of the future; while another

beautiful lyric is "Marian," a perfect portrait in three lyrical stanzas of eight lines. In the sonnet form, too, Mr Meredith has given us some work that is great indeed. "Lucifer in Starlight" is an addition to the small group of the world's greatest sonnets. It might have been written by Milton; subject, treatment and swing of the verse are alike Miltonic, while the last two lines are magnificent in their grand simplicity.

In the two volumes of poems, as I have said, will be found the great body of Mr Meredith's poetical work, but much, which he has not seen fit to reproduce in that collected form, may be seen in the separate earlier volumes and also in the pages of periodicals, and such are of great interest to all decided admirers of his productions; but here I have wished to confine my introduction to those of his writings which are readily obtainable, so that a reader as yet unacquainted, or but partially

acquainted, with the works may turn to them. It is to be hoped that the poet will yet sanction a really complete collection of his poems, Since the two volumes to which I have referred, Mr Meredith has issued two books, *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History*, and *A Reading of Life, with Other Poems*.

The first named of these need not long detain us here. Frankly, it is difficult reading — reading which, while flashing splendid passages on us again and again, compels us ever to be harking back, and often, though we may have done so several times, leaving us bewildered. The Odes are four, and deal with the French Revolution, with Napoleon the Great, with France and the end of 1870 and with Alsace Lorraine.

The second volume, while it is not unmarked by the obscurity of much of the author's later style in poetry, has some fine pieces on man and nature, notably in the

opening stanzas on "The Vital Choice" and the two succeeding pieces on the Goddesses whom it is given to man to choose between,—

"Or shall we run with Artemis,
Or yield the breast to Aphrodite?"

In "The Night Walk" the beautiful limner of word landscape again gives evidence of his memorable power for springing imagination with a touch. Here, too, is a Heinesque little "Song in the Songless," with which I may conclude this chapter :—

"They have no song, the sedges dry,
And still they sing.
It is within my breast they sing,
As I pass by.
Within my breast they touch a string,
They wake a sigh.
There is but sound of sedges dry ;
In me they sing."

III

THE EARLIER NOVELS

“I began to read Mr Meredith at about the time I was deciding the comparative qualities of Plato and Aristotle. To me he was, and is, as much a classic as they: I approach him with as little personal feeling; and if I have to say that all of him is not, in my apprehension, equally good, I can say it with as little disrespect.”

G. S. STREET.

IN speaking of Mr Meredith's “earlier” novels, I wish to signify all the fiction which he issued before *The Egoist*, that work which is considered by many critics the finest in a series containing several masterpieces. These earlier novels, as it will be remembered by those who have read the biographical chapter, began with *The Shaving of Shagpat*, and comprise *Farina*, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *Evan*

Harrington, Sandra Belloni (originally *Emilia in England*), *Rhoda Fleming, Vittoria, The Adventures of Harry Richmond, Beauchamp's Career*, and *The House on the Beach*. Here, indeed, we have a collection which of itself would have sufficed to establish a great reputation, but almost as many works remain for discussion in the next chapter which deals with *The Egoist* and its successors.

It is no necessary part of the work of the critic or eulogist to summarise in bald paragraphs the story of the book or books with which he may be dealing any more than such summary is necessary to the right understanding of his criticism or eulogy. I differentiate criticism and eulogy thus pointedly, because it is in accordance with the spirit of the time so to do. The critic has for so many readers come to signify the fault-finder, and though it may be possible for a minim man to mark faults in a great —with the aid of dimmed glasses it is easiest

to find the spots on the sun—his province must for the most part be that of a praiser. The critic himself feels something like the old dramatic chorus—one just drawing your attention to that which, and you choose to stay, is about to be presented to you. Of the first novel with which we come to deal when we take Mr Meredith's work in chronological order, it is difficult to speak without adapting to the purposes of criticism something of the opulence of language which he has himself expended on the book in question.

If Mr Meredith's earliest essays as poet were calculated to appeal to but a small circle of readers, the same was certainly true of his first example in that art in which he was to win such a notable position. His first volume of poems had been published in 1851, his first volume of prose made its appearance four years later with the title of *The Shaving of Shagpat: an Arabian Entertainment*. Re-reading this, I am amazed

at the recollection that it was published when the author was but six-and-twenty. Its sureness of touch, the splendour of its imagination, the truly Oriental opulence of its style, all seem the work of a man of letters of ripe experience.

Of the book itself what can we say? It is one which might well take its place as a supplement to the *Thousand Nights and a Night* for its glorious abandonment of all that is—and all that is possible—for the sake of that wonderful place which exists only in the minds of the most imaginative of men, but which, once reduced within the bounds of human language, appeals to that love of the marvellous inherent in the mind of man all the world over. The work is, indeed, an absolute triumph in the realm of pure imagination—full of the wildest extravagances told with the serenity of confident faith—told, too, in such a manner as to entrance the reader and make him free of the realm of strangest happenings. The

simplicity of the causative machinery—the shaving of a single hair on the head of the illustrious Shagpat—is superb when we think of the train of wonders which it evolves. The opening passage is rich in promise, which every subsequent page helps to fulfil:—

“It was ordained that Shibli Bagarag, nephew to the renowned Baba Mustapha, chief barber to the Court of Persia, should shave Shagpat, the son of Shimpoor, the son of Shullum; and they had been clothiers for generations, even to the time of Shagpat the illustrious.

“Now, the story of Shibli Bagarag, and of the ball he followed, and of the subterranean kingdom he came to, and of the enchanted palace he entered, and of the sleeping king he shaved, and of the two princesses he released, and of the Afrite held in subjection by the arts of one and bottled by her, is it not known as ’t were written on the finger-nails of men and

traced in their corner-ropes? As the poet says :

“ ‘ Ripe with oft-telling and old is the tale,
But 't is of the sort that can never grow stale.’ ”

Splendidly is the promise fulfilled. We follow the adventurous Shibli Bagarag from his first interview with an old woman without the city of Shagpat, as a starving and discredited barber, up to the stupendous operation to which he was destined, with something of breathless interest. The strange doings are told with a rapidity and vividness that compel the attention, whether we are following Shibli Bagarag on his roundabout route to the Identical, or reading such slightly connected interludes as that fascinating gem of Oriental splendour—and of seeming Oriental manufacture—“*Bhanavar the Beautiful*.” The story, as has been said, does not call for summarising—indeed, it is perhaps best described as being not so much a story as a number of stories held

together by the interest of Shibli Bagarag in destroying the Identical, that portentous single hair on the head of the greatly hirsute Shagpat—but a few words may be written on the subject of the style, and those words may most fittingly be prefaced by the brief foreword which the author contributed to the first edition. This, which was dated “December 8, 1855,” ran as follows:—

“It has seemed to me that the only way to tell an Arabian story was by imitating the style and manners of the Oriental story-tellers. But such an attempt, whether successful or not, may read like a translation: I therefore think it better to prelude this Entertainment by an avowal that it springs from no Eastern source, and is in every respect an original work.”

Wonderfully have the spirit and style of the Orientalist been caught, so wonderfully that we cannot but regret that Mr Meredith has not kept this prefatory note in all subsequent editions of the work.

I have heard readers more than once declare that *The Shaving of Shagpat* must be a translation, or at least an adaptation, one such pointing triumphantly with a kind of Fluellen-like logic to the fact that there is a Baba Mustapha in the *Shaving* and a Baba Mustapha in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*! I should like, also, to have seen the second prefatory note, which appeared in the next two editions, given in later ones. This second note ran thus:—

“It has been suggested to me by one who has no fear of Allegories on the banks of the Nile, that the hairy Shagpat must stand to mean umbrageous Humbug conquering the sons of men; and that Noorna bin Noorka represents the Seasons, which help us, if there is health in us, to dispel the affliction of his shadow; while my heroic Shibli Bagarag is actually to be taken for Circumstance, which works under their changeful guidance towards our ultimate release from bondage, but with a dis-

appointing apparent waywardness. The excuse for such behaviour as this youth exhibits is so good that I would willingly let him wear the grand mask hereby offered to him. But, though his backslidings cry loudly for some sheltering plea, or garb of dignity, and though a storyteller should be flattered to have it supposed that anything very distinct was intended by him, the Allegory must be rejected altogether. The subtle Arab who conceived Shagpat meant either very much more, or he meant less; and my belief is that, designing in his wisdom simply to amuse, he attempted to give a larger embrace to time than is possible to the profound dispenser of Allegories which are mortal; which, to be of any value, must be perfectly clear, and when perfectly clear, are as little attractive as Mrs Malaprop's reptile."

The seeker for the allegorical in a pure entertainment is here sufficiently snubbed.

Farina: a Legend of Cologne, which was Mr Meredith's next essay in fiction, need not detain us long. It is a romantic extravagance allied in spirit with the *Shaving of Shagpat*, although saturated with the mediæval romanticism of the West, where the early tale reflected Oriental splendours. In many editions the two stories have been bound together, and they certainly stand apart from their author's later work, although in them we find a plentiful display of his genius as master of words. *Farina*, the name of the hero, will be familiar to all readers as that which confronts them on the bottles of the famous odorous waters of Cologne. It is a mediæval tale of love and love's distress, telling how, despite the poverty of his circumstances, the power of his rivals and the jealousy of a formidable club, *Farina* won the fair *Margarita*, the White Rose of Germany. Incidentally *Farina* was a witness of the Monk *Gregory's* contest with the Evil One on the

Drachenstein, the result of which contest was that the Devil took a short cut to the Nether World through Cologne, and Cologne stank so foully therefore that none could enter it. Farina was, however, blessed in having witnessed the great struggle, and was able to purify the city with the precious liquid thenceforward famous as eau de Cologne. The "legend," as set forth in this short romance—it is but about a third the length of *Shagpat*—is a gorgeous piece of literary tapestry, and if less remarkable than the earlier work, is yet a story of curious distinction, and of considerable interest in any record of its author's literary development. The dialogue between the Monk and the Devil in the encounter on the stormy Drachen might have been the inspiring model which Dr Richard Garnett had before him when he wrote some of his tales in that fascinating miscellany of wit and wisdom, *The Twilight of the Gods*.

George Meredith was a young man of thirty when he inaugurated a new kind of fiction by the writing of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. *The Shaving of Shagpat* stood, and stands, *sui generis*, and *Farina* was but a tentative essay. The new fiction thus quietly put before the reading public at the end of the fifties was by no means popular, is, indeed, still far from that popularity which is commanded by certain more or less illiterate idols of the circulating libraries. This fact need not disturb us, for, after all, it is by no means an invariable rule that that which is recognised as true literature is really popular.

Every inaugurator of a "school" or a "period" is, of course, but a remarkable link in a continuous chain, and thus it is worth noting that in the year in which *Richard Feverel* was published Thackeray issued *The Virginians*, Dickens *The Tale of Two Cities*, and George Eliot her *Adam Bede*. With Dickens Meredith has

little relationship as novelist beyond his occasional presentation of a caricature among the minor persons of a story; he stands much closer to Thackeray, and from the outset, in one respect, he towers above that master of the art of fiction, namely, in his consummate power as a delineator of women.

It is curious that at a time when Thackeray was concerning himself with the American War of Independence, in writing a sequel to his masterpiece, and Dickens was partly forgetting his power as caricaturist in a tragedy ringed round by the greater tragedy of the French Revolution, the younger writer was devoting himself to a close analytical study of contemporary humanity. As master of the literary art, as reader of character, he leaped at once into the front rank, beginning his career as novelist with a work which was to be esteemed as one of the greatest novels of the century. The fact was, however, at

the time recognised by but few. It would be in the highest sense interesting to know if Thackeray read *Richard Feverel* and to learn his judgment of the story. That some folk realised the existence of a genius now more fully made manifest was proved by the fact that his immediately succeeding novel was published serially.

Perhaps the best test of the true excellence of a literary work is not to be found in an account of its reception on publication, not what will be thought of it—to take a short view—a quarter of a century hence, but rather to find out whether it goes on becoming known to an ever-widening circle. Will there, for every ten readers made aware of its existence, be fifty or five hundred readers after a term of years? Will it, in other words, remain in that magic sieve through which Time is for ever dropping a rapid stream of matter too light or too heavy to be counted by him as worthy of such temporary preservation as he allows to the best?

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel has splendidly stood this test. It is now over forty years since the novel was first published, and the friends of Lucy and Richard and the cursers of Sir Austin's infernal System have gone on ever increasing in numbers.

Beautiful as is the romance of Richard and Lucy, tragic as is its close, and strongly as this may hold the reader who values a book mainly for the way in which it can stimulate his liking for the tale of love and love's distress, the work is largely a study of one personality, the personality being that of Sir Austin Feverel, the complete egoist who strives too much to play the part of Providence to his son. Having conceived of a System for the upbringing of the youth, everything is made to subordinate itself to that System and the end for which it has been designed. The blind thoroughness with which it is carried out may best be gathered from a quoted page, the opening of the thirteenth chapter :—

“It was now, as Sir Austin had written it down, *The Magnetic Age: the Age of violent attractions*, when to hear mention of love is dangerous, and to see it, a communication of the disease. People at Raynham were put on their guard by the baronet, and his reputation for wisdom was severely criticised in consequence of the injunctions he thought fit to issue through butler and housekeeper down to the lower household, for the preservation of his son from any visible symptom of the passion. A footman and two housemaids are believed to have been dismissed on the report of heavy Benson that they were in or inclining to the state; upon which an undercook and a dairymaid voluntarily threw up their places, averring that ‘they did not want no young men, but to have their sex spied after by an old wretch like that,’ indicating the ponderous butler, ‘was a little too much for a Christian woman,’ and then they were ungenerous enough to glance at Benson’s well-known

marital calamity, hinting that some men met their deserts. So intolerable did heavy Benson's espionage become, that Raynham would have grown depopulated of its woman-kind had not Adrian interfered, who pointed out to the baronet what a fearful arm his butler was wielding. Sir Austin acknowledged it despondently. 'It only shows,' said he, with a fine spirit of justice, 'how all but impossible it is to legislate where there are women!'

"'I do not object,' he added; 'I hope I am too just to object to the exercise of their natural inclinations. All I ask from them is discreetness.'

"'Ay,' said Adrian, whose discreetness was a marvel.

"'No gadding about in couples,' continued the baronet, 'no kissing in public. Such occurrences no boy should witness. Whenever people of both sexes are thrown together they will be silly; and where they are high-fed, uneducated, and barely occupied,

it must be looked for as a matter of course. Let it be known that I only require discreetness.'

"Discreetness, therefore, was instructed to reign at the Abbey. Under Adrian's able tuition the fairest of its domestics acquired that virtue.

"Discreetness, too, was enjoined to the upper household."

This is not the place to follow out the story of the System—how it blasted Richard's young life, destroyed his girl wife and left its originator with something yet of the smug superiority out of which it grew. Towards the close of the book we read: "'I may have been wrong in one thing,' he said, with an air of the utmost doubt of it. 'I, perhaps, was wrong in allowing him so much liberty during his probation.'" Had there been a few more men of the type of Austin Wentworth about him, and fewer of the Algernon, Adrian and Hippias types, it would have been well for the lives of all concerned,

but fatal to the story which stands as one of the greatest romances of the age and, according to some critics, the best of its author's novels, though the first. In this story we have at the very outset of Mr Meredith's career as novelist some of his most notable characteristics plainly before us. The careful, close and relentless presentation of the central character, the no less distinct individualising of others, whether prominent or subsidiary—even where a tinker and a ploughman appear for a brief while they are made real to us with their "pithy, vulgar talk, succulent with honest nature and bookless mother wit," to use James Thomson's phrase. Then, too, there is an absence of all material sensationalism, all external violence, events being produced by the consistent action, interaction and counter-action of individuals—the sum of which in real life is perhaps what we mean when we talk of Circumstance. Through the whole there runs that kindly irradiation which is

often the best manifestation of humour, and never far to seek are those crystallisations of happy thoughts in a few words which constitute wit. We have a delightful instance of the latter in Lady Blandish's neat turning of the tables on the aphoristic baronet whose System has reached one of its darker moments. "When a wise man makes a false step will he not go farther than a fool?" Lady Blandish's modest question might stand as the text of the whole novel — if only we could bring ourselves to acknowledge the wisdom of Sir Austin Feverel.

In this his first novel Mr Meredith at once gave proof of his insight and ability in the portrayal of women—far removed from the "wooden" or "galvanised," which are, he tells us, sweet alike to writer as to reader. Lucy, the simple, loving girl, true as steel to her love; Mrs Berry, a human character of the class of which Mrs Gamp is the immortal caricature; Lady Blandish with her

womanly humanity and commonsense ever clashing with her affection for Sir Austin; worldly Mrs Doria and her weak daughter—all of these *live*. Even where there is a slight tendency to caricature, as in the colossal “Dyspepsy,” Hippias Feverel, the author has always held command of his creation and kept him within the bounds of the actual, for Hippias is as real as Joseph Sedley. Essential poetry is here in thought and in description—and especially in that triumphant chapter (who that has once read it understandingly can ever forget it?) which tells of the first meeting of Richard and Lucy during the Magnetic Age, when certain singers to young blood set all the barriers of the System at nought.

In his succeeding novel Mr Meredith gave us that wonderful adaptation of *Sartor Resartus* to the purpose of romance, that prose “sartoriad,” to use his own word, *Evan Harrington*. Here again the story—the love passages between a young couple—

interesting as it will be found even by the avid story-reader, was made subservient to the remorseless delineation of a single character, and in this case the character was that of a woman. On closing this comedy—the work of a novelist Molière—the type-figure remaining in our memory is that of the tailor's daughter married to the insignificant Portuguese count—the Countess de Saldar. The keynote to her character may be found in a few lines from a letter to her sister written from a country mansion where she was staying: "In future, my dear, let it be *De Saldar de Sancorvo*. That is our title *by rights*, and it may as well be so in England. English *Countess* is certainly best. Always put the *de*."

This is a story of the conflict between "trade" and "blood"—and in these days trade is so far triumphant that we have to remember that nearly forty years have passed since *Evan Harrington* was written. Daring was the resolve to make a hero—and a

gentleman—not only of a tradesman, but even of one who practised that trade at which Scorn, for some inscrutable reason, ever directs her proverb-pointed digit. Clearly and convincingly—thanks to the scheming Countess—is the difficult romance brought about so as to instal the penniless son of a tailor—himself doomed to tailordom—as a guest in a country mansion within riding reach of the place of his origin, and consistently are matters developed to the close.

“The poetry of my Countess’s achievements waxes rich in manifold colours: I see her by the light of her own pleas to Providence. I doubt almost if the hand be mine which dared to make a hero play second fiddle, and to his beloved. I have placed a bushel over his light, certainly. Poor boy! it was enough that he should have tailordom on his shoulders: I ought to have allowed him to conquer Nature, and so come out of his eclipse. This shall be said

of him : that he can play second fiddle without looking foolish, which, for my part, I call a greater triumph than if he were performing the heroics we are more accustomed to."

Technically, as it seems to me, *Evan Harrington* is in certain respects an advance upon *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*; there is a more complicated story, more of the interplay of diverse characters, and as a consequence more remarkable creations. In this record Mr Meredith is here absolutely lavish, prodigal as Dickens in his longer stories, and no less successfully does he differentiate, while more successfully does he develop them. I have cited the Countess de Saldar, who is indeed a marvellous representation—a more subtly vulgar, a more accomplished and a more fascinating Becky Sharp—though I can scarcely go to the length of Mr Richard Le Gallienne, who, for the purpose of paying a compliment to Mr Meredith, condemns a sex, and speaks of her as that "wonderful study of

woman in her great natural *rôle* of charlatan." Mrs Mel, the self-sufficient, inflexible widow of the splendid tailor; Caroline Strike, the weakest and most lovable of the daughters of the shears; the loving, girlish Rose, and, above all, Lady Jocelyn, are as convincingly natural representatives of their sex as the scheming snob-woman, the Countess. They are less elaborately drawn, it is true, for the character of the incomparable De Saldar is delineated with an elaboration of detail which Mr Meredith might have learned from his friends of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Of the truly Shakespearean quality of individualising minor characters we have here illustrations, but hinted at in the earlier novel and in chapters VIII. XI. and XII. are some of the finest inn-scenes of which I know in our literature.

Society having been limned in the first novel and Trade in the second, the novelist turned to a fresh field for his social studies

and wrote *Emilia in England*, where the romance circles round the *nouveau riche*, with a young Italian as the fascinating heroine, and a heroine such as Mr Meredith can delineate with loving insight and sympathy. He does not pander to the taste for "diseased little heroines," whom he referred to incidentally in *Evan Harrington*. Sandra—for, despite her other names Emilia and Vittoria, it is as Sandra that we remember her—is a delight from when we first hear that wonderful voice of hers at night in the woodland part of a Surrey common, in the second chapter of this book, until we bid her farewell on the last page of *Vittoria*. Quite apart from the heroine, with her great voice and her passionate love for oppressed Italy, the novel is remarkable for the gallery of successful character portraits presented in its pages—though this is, of course, one of the most notable features of Mr Meredith's work as novelist. The Pole family is unforgettable, with the unobtrusive money-

making father, and his three daughters in league together to jockey him into a position of social importance, who study the shades of fine feeling that they may not err in being too familiar or too distant with the acquaintances on the social plane which they are desirous of leaving for a higher. We have here evidence of the studies in social comedy which in later years were to produce *The Egoist*. Arabella, Cornelia and Adela Pole are neatly differentiated by fine shades (Pole, Polar and North' Pole were the terms by which among themselves they defined the nice shades of difference in their bows—which the Tinleys, their rivals on the lower plane, cruelly perverted into Pole, Polony and Maypole). These three sisters have one brother, Wilfrid, whom they look to as an aid in their campaign of social advancement, while he himself is torn by the old conflict of love and interest. Mrs Chump, too, the Irish widow who is courted by old Pole, but whose presence is a perpetual irritant to his

sensitive daughters, is a notable addition to Mr Meredith's gallery of eccentrics, though it has been declared by Irish critics otherwise sympathetic that her brogue is *not* Irish. Another prominent eccentric is Mr Pericles, the moneyed Greek merchant who, ridiculous as he is in many respects, and much as he gains our contempt, yet claims our sympathy by his whole-hearted devotion to Sandra Belloni's wonderful voice.

Pericles has a big part to play, too, in the inevitable humbling of the *nouveau riche*, and also in the arranging of Sandra Belloni's future. It is Wilfrid Pole who awakens the passion of love in Sandra's breast, but who has not the courage to cleave to her when circumstance, powerfully aided by his ambitious family, drives him towards a lady with a title; he is indeed a weak hero, and one whom we realise as foredoomed to failure. He is not worthy of Sandra in any way, although he is one of the principals in a love-scene at Wilming

Weir which is only comparable to the idyllic meeting of Lucy and Richard in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. Letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would," he makes shipwreck of his hopes and gives a rude shock to the girl who has unreservedly declared her passion for him. Sandra herself is indeed a triumph: in her we feel that Mr Meredith first drew one of his great type-women; she is passion and song incarnate in the form of a beautiful woman—we feel impelled to love her in the first novel which is devoted to her story, but we are compelled to do so when we meet her again as Vittoria in the sequel of that name. Here the scene is changed to Italy, and the story opens with a small gathering on the Monte Motterone, when Sandra meets several of the leaders in the coming contest against the triumphing Austrians. Here the nameless "Chief" makes brief but impressive appearance. The time is that of the Lombard revolt of 1848 and

the Chief is, of course, Mazzini. Throughout the book Sandra, under her singer's name of Vittoria, is of course the central figure in the Italian risings. Her whilom lover, the young English officer Wilfrid Pole, has joined the Austrian service (in which he has an uncle who is a general), and the girlish love which she had felt for him becomes the woman's passion for a young Italian leader, Carlo Ammiani. The night of Sandra's *début* at La Scala in Milan is chosen for the moment of the Italian rising, and she is chosen to give the signal from the stage. Communicating with her old lover, she arouses suspicion in an arch-schemer, through whose influence the moment of the rising is postponed for a week. Bound by her promise to the Chief, and despite the urgent wishes of her lover, the advice of her friends and the suspicions of the Austrians, she determines to fulfil her task. She does so, and only escapes from the theatre by the connivance

of some Austrian officers. Henceforward, first as fugitive and then following the army, we find her severely tried but greatly equal to her trials; often misunderstood, even by those loving her the most, she always justifies her own nature as one of the novelist's greatest women—a woman in whose presentation we feel that he has laboured as lovingly as in those other great women whom he has given us as central figures in *The Egoist*, in *Diana of the Crossways* and in *The Tragic Comedians*. Mr Meredith makes most of the men, of impressionable age, who meet her fall in love with this splendid type of womanhood, and so subtly does he present her to his readers that I fancy that there are few who do not feel for her something of the devotion of Merthyr Powys—the Welsh gentleman who devotes himself and his fortune, ably seconded by his noble sister, to the cause of Italian freedom. If in the years that followed her brief married life Sandra

married again, we may feel content that it was to Merthyr Powys that she was united—the only one of her lovers of whom it can be said that he was entirely worthy. Powys plays a strong but unobtrusive part in the development of Sandra's destiny in both of the novels, and on him Mr Meredith has lavished his admiration for the Welsh character. It is rarely that a sequel is as good as the work which it succeeds, but *Vittoria* is a triumphant exception to the rule. It is a fine story looked at from the mere story-book point of view, but when we examine its characterisation, its reflection of the popular movement in Italy, its presentment of scenes and situations, its breadth of treatment, it is an amazing masterpiece.

Sandra Belloni was produced, as I pointed out in an earlier chapter, in 1864, and *Vittoria* (after running serially through one of the reviews) in 1867, but between the writing of these two parts of one great

whole Mr Meredith found time to write another novel of a different character—the simple but tragic story of *Rhoda Fleming*. With much in it that is characteristic of its author's better work, this book is found a little disappointing in some respects by his best admirers. In it we have the simplicity of the country contrasted with the villainy of the town, although the author is much too clear-sighted an observer to attempt to give a monopoly of either quality to either place. In baldest outline the story is one of the seduction of a farmer's daughter under cover of a pretended marriage. The whole romance centres in that, for although the eponymous heroine is the one for whom we feel the greatest interest, it is her sister Dahlia who is the principal figure of the painful drama. It is a good example of Mr Meredith's method, as described by himself, of introducing various characters and working them up to a

critical position and then showing how their various natures behave in that crisis. The whole is vaguely foreshadowed in the last paragraph of the first chapter. It is May Day being celebrated in the neighbourhood of the Kentish farm from which the two heroines spring:—

“The magic of the weather brought numerous butterflies afield, and one fiddler, to whose tuning the little women danced; others closer upon womanhood would have danced likewise, if the sisters had taken partners; but Dahlia was restrained by the sudden consciousness that she was under the immediate observation of two manifestly London gentlemen, and she declined to be led forth by Robert Armstrong. The intruders were youths of good countenance, known to be the son and nephew of Squire Blancove of Wrexby Hall. They remained for some time watching the scene, and destroyed Dahlia’s single-mindedness. Like many days of gaiety, the Gods consenting,

this one had its human shadow. There appeared on the borders of the festivity a young woman, the daughter of a Wrexby cottager, who had left her home and but lately returned to it, with a spotted name. No one addressed her, and she stood humbly apart. Dahlia, seeing that everyone moved away from her, whispering with satisfied noddings, wished to draw her in among the groups. She mentioned the name of Mary Burt to her father, supposing that so kind a man would not fail to sanction her going up to the neglected young woman. To her surprise, her father became violently enraged, and uttered a stern prohibition, speaking a word that stained her cheeks. Rhoda was by her side, and she wilfully, without asking leave, went straight over to Mary, and stood with her under the shadow of the Adam and Eve, until the farmer sent a messenger to say that he was about to enter the house. Her punishment for the act of sinfulness was a week of severe

silence; and the farmer would have kept her to it longer, but for her mother's ominously growing weakness. The sisters were strangely overclouded by this incident. They could not fathom the meaning of their father's unkindness, coarseness and indignation. Why, and why? they asked one another blankly. The Scriptures were harsh in one part, but was the teaching to continue so after the Atonement? By degrees they came to reflect, and not in a mild spirit, that the kindest of men can be cruel, and will forget their Christianity toward offending and repentant women."

Here at the very outset we have a subtle indication of the whole tragedy, for the reader is made to feel instinctively that the cloud over the scene is charged with the lightning of a coming storm. The story is fuller of what I may call conventionally dramatic situations than any other of this great series of novels. The tragedy develops quietly enough at first with

Dahlia's departure for the Metropolis as companion to an old uncle who is messenger at a City bank, but who is credited by the bucolic mind with the possession of as much wealth as he handles. From Dahlia's elopement the development of the story moves rapidly, every stage of its progress illustrating the individuality of each of the many actors concerned. Full of thoroughly characteristic matter, *Rhoda Fleming* is yet in some ways disappointing. It is disappointing perhaps only in a conventional sense that in neither of the sisters do we feel that we have a heroine with whom we can unreservedly sympathise. Dahlia, the weak, confiding nature with something of rustic obstinacy at the back of all, has our pity, and Rhoda wins our esteem by the strong consistency of her actions. We fully realise the way in which she would have inspired love in Robert, but we feel that with a touch more of tenderness tempering her desire for justice we should have had a more

lovable heroine. Yet let it be conceded at once that there are such women as Rhoda; most of us know them—women of absolute rectitude themselves who in their insistence upon their view of the right course give considerable discomfort (to put it at its mildest) to other people. With such a woman the development of the story might probably have been as Mr Meredith has told it, but we must also remember Dahlia, and she, it may be imagined, would have attempted to poison herself rather earlier than she did. A realist less ruthless than Mr Meredith would have been sorely tempted to stop the marriage with Nick Sedgett and have allowed the repentant Edward Blancove to undo the mischief he had done so far as he was able, but the greater novelists follow life rather than sensational conventions, and life does not always run to a happy close. Edward Blancove, too, is so cool in his villainy that we do not altogether believe in his

tardy repentance. Farmer Fleming with his rigid ideas, Robert Armstrong, Algernon Blancove, the "fool" of the tragedy, Mrs Lovell and Anthony Hackbut—these are the character triumphs of the story; and the old countryman, Mas' Gammon—an animated piece of Kentish clay—with his infinite capacity for taking dumpling—though I have heard true Meredithians condemn him as unreal, seems to me a fine presentation of the narrow, stolid, vegetant farm hand that is, we may believe, being educated off the land.

It is not surprising with a writer such as Mr Meredith that generally a couple of years or more — generally more — passed between the production of any two of his novels. *Vittoria* was published in 1867 after its serial appearance, and it was 1871 before the next story appeared in book form, having run through the pages of the *Cornhill Magazine*.

With this new novel, *The Adventures of*

Harry Richmond, we come to a story which contained similarities to, and some essential differences from, those which preceded it. Where it differs from all the other of Mr Meredith's stories is in the fact of its being told in autobiographic form, a fashion which best suits the extravagance of its idea. This idea is somewhat like that at the back of the splendid tailor, but with considerable changes in the matter of rank. Evan, thanks to a wonderful father and a socially ambitious sister, finds himself—the son of a tailor—congregating with the county notables; Harry Richmond is the grandson and apparent heir of one of the richest of such notables, but he has a father who seeks to establish nothing less than their position as connections of the Throne. (Surely the great Roy might better claim direct kinship with the great Mel than a bend-sinister connection with the Guelphs!) Here such a fine master of comedy as Mr Meredith gave himself an excellent opportunity, and

by telling the story through the mouth of the young man he avoided the falling into farce or melodrama. As it is, the element of farce is by no means absent. Augustus Fitz-George Roy Richmond is a marvellous being; half genuine, half mountebank and wholly fascinating, he succeeds in impressing the reader with something of the conviction which he imparted to most of those who came within the charmed circle of his immediate influence. He is a mixture of the beau and the mountebank—as the former we see him triumphing at Bath and seeking to restore the fashionable glories of that resort, and as the latter he is seen to perfection in that unforgettable chapter where he poses as the equestrian statue of the hero of a petty German principality. He is really great in his blazing brilliancy with his “Case,” by which he is confident of wresting recognition and a fitting income from the English Government. He is a very prince in his magnificence when he

has the funds, or can command becoming credit, but he suffers the ups and downs of the splendid adventurer and very seriously threatens the continued prosperity of the son for whose advancement he labours so unceasingly and so unwisely. Contrasting with Roy Richmond is Squire Beltham, Harry's maternal grandfather — a hearty, bluff old man with the most uncompromising hatred of the man who had eloped with his daughter. Beltham, it is easy to believe, is a character in the creation of whom the novelist delighted; he is hearty, downright, wholesome, English, and a hater after Dr Johnson's heart, while his daughter, the loving and love-inspiring Aunt Dorothy, is one of the most perfect portraits in miniature which Mr Meredith has given us. Her part in the story is that of the good fairy, and her reward the having to listen to the Squire's outbursts when he lashes the discredited Roy with the unrestrained passion of his invective and

strips him bare for scorn to point at. The hero is very awkwardly placed betwixt such a grandfather-guardian and such a parent. Thanks to these opposing influences, he has a most adventurous career ; the author's object in writing this novel might indeed have been to show that even in the days of the nineteenth century adventures were still to the adventurous, for Harry certainly, thanks now to his love for his fascinating father, and now to a spirit of something like quixotry, becomes the central figure of adventures of a startling character at home and abroad, by land and by sea. Less engrossing perhaps for any central character study this is perhaps the most engrossing of all its author's works considered merely as story. The reader is kept in doubt to the very close as to what is to be the end of Harry Richmond's romance : some folk—lovers of the romantic spirit, those who cry with the pathetic poet,

“Ye gods, annihilate time and space,
And make two lovers happy,”

—will hope that the hero is to wed his German princess, others will be firm adherents of the sterling English girl, Janet Ilchester. Without any undue straining the result remains in doubt until we reach the end, and of course, from the story-lover's point of view, the work gains thereby. For pure story, indeed, I think that no novel of Mr Meredith's is better than this; though perhaps *Rhoda Fleming* comes very near to it in this respect. The boisterous liveliness of the later novel will, however, prove a further recommendation to many readers—it is as full of richest fun, of glorious abandon, of pulsing, hot-blooded life as Elizabethan comedy.

Mr Meredith's next novel, the last before the appearance of *The Egoist*, is *Beauchamp's Career*, a story which one of the author's admirers stigmatises as unutterably

dull, and which another ranks high for containing in its pages one of the novelist's great type-women. It is notable, as Mr R. Maynard Leonard has pointed out in a brief but interesting paper on "Politics in George Meredith's Novel,"* for being the one really political novel which the author has given us, although incidental passages on politics are found in many of them. Here the very substance of the work is political, the chief characters belong to the two great parties which have so long shared power in this land, and out of them and the interaction of their political beliefs the drama is evolved. As hero Mr Meredith is fond of taking a youth whose training has been influenced by his being early orphaned or by his having been brought up by one parent only: Richard Feverel had no living mother to modify his father's eccentricities; Evan Harrington has lost his father at the moment that we take up his story; Sandra has fled from

* *New Liberal Review*, November 1901.

parental influence; Rhoda Fleming and her sister are motherless when most needing a mother's guidance; Harry Richmond was in this regard on the same footing as Richard Feverel. Here in Nevil Beauchamp we have a hero orphaned as a boy and brought up by an uncle who is a fine specimen of the old nobility—"with his strength and skill, his robust commonsense and rough, shrewd wit, his prompt comparisons, his chivalry, his love of combat, his old knightly blood." This uncle, Everard Romfrey, afterwards Earl Romfrey, fascinates even when most in opposition to the hero, and the opposition waxes severe at times when the Tory nobleman finds his nephew joined not with the Liberals but with the Radicals, and the Radicals, be it remembered, of a generation ago. Although the story has much in it of varied love interest it is largely a record of the clashing of diverse wits, engaged now in pursuit of beauty and now in pursuit of national well-being. Nevil

begins, fittingly enough, as a midddy in the Navy in the days of the Crimean War, he becomes one of the recognised heroes of the time and wins rapid promotion, but as captain ruins his prospects of further advancement by throwing himself wholeheartedly into the Radical cause. Landing from his ship he has fallen in with a notable Radical leader in the person of Dr Shrapnel and at once, with characteristic impetuosity, flings himself into an election contest, without even communicating with his uncle, who, however, is the means not perhaps of getting him defeated, but of getting him defeated by his worthless, scheming cousin. It is hoped to give Nevil a lesson, but his lack of success by no means throws him back to the family Toryism; he is devoted to his new cause, and from being a Radical declares himself a Republican. His love stories are closely blent with his work as naval officer and later as political agitator; first he has a boyish and abiding passion

for a beautiful young French woman, a maturer affection for Cecilia Halkett, and a love begotten of propinquity for Jenny Denham. Propinquity wins, but somehow the love story of Beauchamp is by no means the most interesting part of his career; he is largely attractive for his likeness to his uncle—the same personal qualities underlie their wide differences, and we feel that in a sense the whole of Beauchamp's "career" is a duel with the head of the house from which he has sprung, and what is more, we feel that Nevil, in his tragic self-sacrifice at the close, has conquered. It is a fine touch where, while looking for Nevil's body, the stricken old Earl thinks at once of the infant son whom Nevil has left, now his own heir; he is speaking to the afflicted Shrapnel, "My wife has gone down to Mrs Beauchamp," he said. "She will bring her and the baby to Mount Laurels. The child will have to be hand-fed. I take you with me. You must not be alone." One needs to

have read the story to appreciate this fine touch of character, to remember that he is speaking to the man who had won in the contest. Shrapnel is indeed a wonderful character, one who abides with us long after we have laid aside the book which gives him life. A trenchant and uncompromising Radical, he is an original thinker, and one finely fitted for inspiring confidence in generous minds coming under his personal influence, and, above all, in one such as Nevil Beauchamp, who from boyhood had been a reader of Carlyle :—

“His favourite author was one writing of Heroes, in (so she esteemed it) a style resembling either early architecture or utter dilapidation, so loose and rough it seemed ; a wind-in-the-orchard style, that tumbled down here and there an appreciable fruit with uncouth bluster ; sentences without commencements running to abrupt endings and smoke, like waves against a sea wall, learned dictionary words giving a hand to

street slang, and accents falling on them haphazard like slant rays from driving clouds; all the pages in a breeze, the whole book producing a kind of electrical agitation in the minds and the joints. This was its effect on the lady."

It is perhaps always dangerous to attempt to identify an author with any one of his characters; proof of which is to be found in the diversity in which such a practice puts different critics. Mr W. L. Courtney has said that he sees Mr Meredith in Adrian Harley of *Richard Feverel*; I seem to see him more clearly, or at least to catch features of him, in the Radical doctor of Bevisham. I certainly feel ready to apply to Mr Meredith the words which he makes Nevil speak of Shrapnel—"I maintain there is wisdom in him when conventional minds would think him at his wildest. Believe me, he is the humanest, the best of men, tender-hearted as a child: the most benevolent, simple-minded, admirable old man—

the man I am proudest to think of as an Englishman and a man living in my time, of all men existing. I can't overpraise him."

Here, as elsewhere, the author introduces us to a whole circle of well-individualised people—people who are really convincing to those who can appreciate character study and who are not satisfied with having a story built up around mere named puppets. I feel that here, again, we have Mr Meredith as realist in the finest sense; as he says towards the close of the story in one of his Thackerayan asides to the reader:—

"We will make no mystery about it. I would I could. Those happy tales of mystery are as much my envy as the popular narratives of the deeds of bread and cheese people, for they both create a tide-way in the attentive mind; the mysterious pricking our credulous flesh to creep, the familiar urging our obese imagination to constitutional exercise. And oh, the refreshment there is in dealing with char-

acters either contemptibly beneath us or supernaturally above! My way is like a Rhone island in the summer drought, stony, unattractive and difficult between the two forceful streams of the unreal and the over-real, which delight mankind—honour to the conjurers! My people conquer nothing, win none; they are actual, yet uncommon. It is the clock-work of the brain that they are directed to set in motion, and—poor troop of actors to vacant benches!—the conscience residing in thoughtfulness which they would appeal to; and if you are there impervious to them, we are lost: back I go to my wilderness, where, as you perceive, I have contracted the habit of listening to my own voice more than is good.” Between the unreal and the over-real aptly describes this work; the pity of it is that such a preponderating majority of readers prefer those extremes.

In 1877—between the publication of *Beauchamp's Career* and that of *The Egoist*

—Mr Meredith contributed a couple of short stories to the *New Quarterly Magazine*. These stories were *The House on the Beach* and *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper*, and though they remained for years without being reprinted (except in America, where they were to be bought for a few cents), they are so delightful that the reader who appreciates this cannot help regretting that Mr Meredith has written so few tales of this character. Full of that spirit of true comedy which plays so important a part in life when looked at with eyes fitted to discover it, the stories contain some memorable characters—unforgettable portraits, indeed, are those of Martin Tinman in the first-named tale and General Ople in the second. Tinman, the retired tradesman, who has become an important official in a small seaport, with his desire to marry and his turned head consequent upon a near approach to Royalty—his quaint combination of meanness and ambition—is a rich

creation of satiric humour. While the modest General who is fascinated by the berouged beauty of his neighbour is a characteristic addition to the Meredithian portrait gallery.

In the summer of 1879 the third of Mr Meredith's short stories appeared in the *New Quarterly Magazine*. This was *The Tale of Chloe: an Episode in the History of Beau Beamish*, a perfect piece of story-telling, in which we have in the woman who gives her name to the book a very striking figure. Chloe is a woman who has given up all to her love for a man wholly unworthy, and who quietly settles down at "the Wells" during the Beauship of Beamish, to await the return of her faithless lover. The young and unsophisticated duchess of an elderly duke is anxious to see life at the Wells, and the duke being past the stage of caring for such frivolity, places her for a month in the care of the Beau and Chloe. The young and artless Duchess Susie soon has many

admirers, and among them Chloe's faithless Caseldy, who soon comes to be favoured to such a degree that an elopement is contemplated. Chloe determines to save her youthful charge, and does so in a strikingly tragic fashion. To summarise the story is to do it an injustice, for no summary can convey the growing sense of tragedy which haunts the comedy of the earlier stages, the amazing artistry of the whole presentation, from the arrival of the Duchess of Dewlap to the noble close. *The Tale of Chloe* now fittingly occupies the first place in the volume of Mr Meredith's short stories, though, like its companions, it had many years to wait for republication, except in a cheap series of American "piracies."

For over twenty years Mr Meredith had been producing his novels, yet he was still known to few and admired by fewer readers. Wit and poetry, marvellous portrayal of diverse characters, evidence of deepest insight—these were scattered over

every page of his books, and yet they remained for the most part unrecognised. The two writers who are the most characteristic novelists of the Victorian era had passed away, but even the consequent looking out for a new avatar did not reveal what should have been so obvious. George Eliot—whose *Adam Bede*, as I have said, appeared in the same year as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*—had become acknowledged popularly as the great novelist of the day, while Mr Thomas Hardy had stepped into popularity almost at once within the few years that had elapsed since Dickens's death. The position was one that might have embittered a man less great than Mr Meredith, but he continued steadily in his path, producing of his best and putting it before a thankless world for the delight and benefit of a comparatively small circle.

Between the two periods into which I have divided Mr Meredith's novels came the very remarkable lecture which he delivered

before the London Institution in February 1877. The title of the lecture was *On the Idea of Comedy and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit*. It was subsequently published in one of the reviews, and twenty years later was issued in book form. The essay is a subtle and penetrating piece of work, one worthy to rank with the best that is in literary criticism. Every page is packed with thought, every line conveys a definite statement elucidating the main theme. Himself our greatest master of comedy, he has given us a masterly exposition of the theme and one which merits really close study by the lover of Meredithian comedy, as well as by students of literature generally.

Certain things, he tells us, are essential to the environment of a great comic poet. "A society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current and the perceptions quick, that he may be supplied with matter and an audience. The semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities, and

feverish emotional periods, repel him ; and also a marked state of social inequality of the sexes ; nor can he whose business is to address the mind be understood where there is not a moderate degree of intellectual activity." The truth of that statement is particularly obvious when we try it on those who "can't read Meredith." Again, we are told that the comic poet "must be able to penetrate ; a corresponding acuteness must exist to welcome him. The necessity for the two conditions will explain how it is that we count him during centuries in the singular number." The comic poet to whom Mr Meredith here refers is, of course, Molière. Himself we may rank as something of a Molière in his prose works, rich as they are in the light thrown on character by the comic spirit. The philosopher may ever dog his steps and insist upon being heard—as Dame Gossip insists in the last of the novels—but then, as he puts it, "Philosopher and Comic Poet are of a cousinship in the eye they cast on life."

I V

THE LATER NOVELS

“He has wit of the swiftest, the most comprehensive, the most luminous, and humour that can be fantastic or ironical or human at his pleasure; he has passion and he has imagination; he has considered sex—the great subject, the leaven of imaginative art—with notable audacity and insight . . . In his best work he takes rank with the world’s novelists. He is a companion for Balzac and Richardson, an intimate for Fielding and Cervantes.”

W. E. HENLEY.

IN 1879 it was just thirty years since Mr Meredith had published his first literary essay in the form of a poem which, as has before been said, appeared in the columns of *Chambers's Journal*; in that thirty years he had gone on producing work of the highest literary value, had established himself as poet with all who care for what is best in poetry, and had produced, as I hope that the last

chapter has shown, stories numerous and valuable enough to assure a great reputation as novelist. Popularity was still a long way off, and, indeed, the author had yet to write both his greatest and his most popular novels. The first, *The Egoist*, was published in this year, while the other, *Diana of the Crossways*, was to come half a dozen years later. Never had a great novelist had so long to wait for full recognition. Scott, Dickens and George Eliot leaped into the widest popularity with their earliest works, while Thackeray was not many years in finding ample appreciation of his stories; but here we have the case of a man—the peer of the best of that great quartet—who had been producing his remarkable novels for a quarter of a century, and who was still unknown to the vast majority of his story-reading countrymen and women. There was, however, no attempt made by the novelist to write down to the public that refused as yet to come up to him, no altering

of the high standard with which he had set out. Indeed, the novel with which he commenced this latter half of his productive career was more markedly "Meredithian" than any of those that had preceded it; and it was so both in the true sense of being the most subtle portrayal of a character from the inside and in the popular sense of opening on a chapter which constitutes "difficult" reading. For the most part the earlier novels had begun with something more or less directly concerning the immediate action of the story, but with *The Egoist* we start with one of those subtle studies which call for more thought on the part of readers than the vast majority of them care to expend on the merely literary aspect of their fiction. In a sense each of the novels, from *The Egoist* onwards, is a study of the many-sided marriage problem, is in a more accentuated degree than usual an examination of the relation of the sexes.

The Egoist is a marvellous book as much

for its diverse portraiture as for its remorseless delineation of an egoism fostered by circumstance to an astounding degree. Every biography is, of course, more or less closely a page transcribed from the great book of Egoism as Mr Meredith conceives it, and here we have what we might call the general egoism most finely shown by a close study of a very prince of egoists. We may not know a Sir Willoughby Patterne, but yet in reading his story, in studying the portrait projected from the novelist's pages, we find ourselves saying how like that is to so and so; at times we feel, too, but, sheltered by our own egoism, more rarely, that even we ourselves contribute a scrap to the composite portrait. But it is not in Sir Willoughby alone that our novelist triumphs here, although the baronet stands as a type with the greatest figures of our greatest dramatists and story-tellers; Clara Middleton, the high-spirited, strong-natured young woman whose life is so nearly wrecked by the

fancied love which hurries her into an engagement with the monster "I" of Patterne Hall, is one of the most thoroughly engaging of Mr Meredith's many engaging women. The manner in which Sir Willoughby, while gradually revealing his nature to her rapidly awakening consciousness, also—but wholly unconsciously — himself provides her with the name which throws an illumination on everything he does and says, is finely put; but, indeed, the whole is so admirable that it becomes something of impertinence to cite a bit, and as inconclusive as a few lines from Hamlet would be in bringing before us the man whom Shakespeare has given as outcome of the whole tragedy. Nowhere in the preceding volumes had Mr Meredith made such rich use of his wonderful powers of psychological analysis, although perhaps in each of the novels, from *Richard Feverel* onwards, are to be found indications of the use to which those powers might be put. In the smug self-satisfaction of Sir Austin

Feverel it seems easy, after the fact, to foresee something of the character of Sir Willoughby Patterne, as in the Lady Jocelyn and Rose of *Evan Harrington*, the Janet Ilchester of *Beauchamp's Career* and the title heroines of *Rhoda Fleming* and *Sandra Belloni* we may read foreshadowings of the perfect woman nobly planned, Clara Middleton. Sandra may remain one's favourite among Meredithian heroines, but surely woman was never more subtly and beautifully represented in the whole range of fiction than in Clara. We feel, indeed, that fiction is scarcely the right word to use here, so true is the psychology, so absolutely real are the men and women who are revealed to us, so natural are the scenes amid which they move and the circumstances which arise from their relations. Mr Meredith called his *House on the Beach* "a realistic tale," as though differentiating it thus from its companions, but in truth the adjective would

better apply to most of those others. Realistic is, of course, a word that has been prostituted from its nicest meaning during the present generation, and especially so when applied to literature and art. It has been so often applied to stories dealing with manifestations of man's lower nature that at last it has come to be imagined that only that lower nature is the *real*, a view as obviously false as it is one-sided. I should say that *The Egoist* is a piece of uncompromising realism—the realism neither of the gutter nor of the shambles, but the realism of ordinary life as seen through the eyes of a man who can see into things, can read the meaning underlying acts and words with a remarkable power undreamed of by the vast majority of his fellows.

In the earlier stories something of the extravagance of romance was introduced—in the union of Richard and Lucy in *Richard Feverel*, in the whole circumstance of the young tailor thrown among county

magnates in *Evan Harrington*, in the careers of Sandra Belloni and of Harry Richmond, in the political adventures of Nevil Beauchamp. Here, however, extravagance of romantic incident or of incongruous persons brought together are not depended upon; the whole comedy, which is absorbingly interesting, is worked, so to speak, from the inside, from the psychological realisation of a number of persons brought by birth or by perfectly natural circumstances into relation with each other. After reading a few chapters we find ourselves wondering not what will happen next in the way in which ordinary story-wrights arouse our wonder, but what the folk will be saying or doing next. We find ourselves looking out for nicest shades in the language showing the development of matters, as in real life, in a time of crisis, we may feel the atmosphere electrical, and know that things said convey more than their obvious meaning. (A state, by the way, which is marvellously

indicated by Mr Meredith in the forty-third chapter of *Rhoda Fleming*.)

In its machinery the story has all the simplicity of a classic tragedy: a richly-dowered young man is the central study, and his search for a wife the principal theme, every incident in the history being shown in its bearing upon the individuality of the Egoist. Adulated, almost worshipped, by his immediate family circle, Sir Willoughby has something of the arrogance of a young god, combined with something of the almost savage selfishness of a feudal kinglet. It comes out in everything, though primarily, of course, in his relations with women, and therefore the reader cannot but rejoice that the irony of circumstance makes him finally unite himself with the long-loving but at last disillusionised woman whose homage he has accepted for years as nothing less than his lordly due. Close as is the attention given to the presentation of Sir Willoughby and

Clara Middleton, it is by no means a story of two alone. Crossjay is a hearty, generous, full-blooded boy, as real to us as our own nephews. Mrs Mountstuart-Jenkinson, with her quickness of perception, her nimbleness of wit, is as a veritable addition to the gallery of women given us by eighteenth-century comedy. Vernon, Horace de Craye, Dr Middleton, Lætitia—these folk crowd upon us as we muse over the story, as old friends crowd upon the memory when we think of some bygone period of our own lives.

Robert Louis Stevenson's views on the novel are interesting, and his experience may be commended to those who do not understand *The Egoist* on a first reading—let them read it again; those who do appreciate it will need no such advice:—

“Talking of Meredith, I have just re-read for the third and fourth time *The Egoist*. When I shall have read it the sixth or seventh I begin to see I shall

know about it. You will be astonished when you come to read it; I had no idea of the matter—human, red matter he has contrived to plug and pack into that strange and admirable book. Willoughby is, of course, a pure discovery; a complete set of nerves, not heretofore examined, and yet running all over the human body—a suit of nerves. Clara is the best girl I ever saw anywhere. Vernon is almost as good. The manner and the faults of the book greatly justify themselves on further study. Only Dr Middleton does not hang together; and Ladies Busshe and Culmer *sont des monstrosités*. Vernon's conduct makes a wonderful odd contrast with Daniel Deronda's. I see more and more that Meredith is built for immortality."

How much truer is this insistence that we should read and re-read our great novelist than the cheap sneer of those who do not find, to use a phrase of Cowper's, the meaning staring them in the face, and

who repeat, in accents now patronising and now indignant, such phrases as the following comment on Mr Meredith's very first published book:—"This predisposition towards strangeness for strangeness' sake is evident, and very frequently the complication appears to have been sought at the expense of meaning rather than elucidation."

Two years after *The Egoist* came *The Tragic Comedians: A Study in a Well-known Story*, wherein the novelist presented in his own fashion the narrative of the later life, love and death of that remarkable reformer, Ferdinand Lassalle. History—certainly nineteenth-century history—affords no more romantic episode than that of the later years of Lassalle, and to Mr Meredith the romance has given a fine opportunity for psychological analysis, and for the presentation of a chapter of life's tragic-comedy, of Nature's fantastical:—

"The pair of tragic comedians of whom there will be question pass under this word

as under their banner and motto. Their acts are incredible: they drank sunlight and drove their bark in a manner to eclipse historical couples upon our planet. Yet they do belong to history, they breathed the stouter air than fiction's, the last chapter of them is written in red blood, and the man pouring out that last chapter was of a mighty nature not unheroical—a man of the active grappling modern brain which wrestles with facts, to keep the world alive, and can create them, to set it spinning. A Faust-like legend might spring from him: he had a devil. He was the leader of a host, the hope of a party, venerated by his followers, well hated by his enemies, respected by the intellectual chiefs of his time, in the pride of his manhood and his labours when he fell. And why this man should have come to his end through love, and the woman who loved him have laid her hand in the hand of the slayer, is the problem we have to study, nothing

inventing, in the spirit and flesh of both.”

By one reading this book for the first time, and ignorant of the story of Ferdinand Lassalle's life, these words are likely to be taken as part of the fiction—a not unusual trick on the part of lesser writers to increase the *vraisemblance* of their work—but here they are literally true, as the briefest summary of Lassalle's biography will suffice to show. Mr Meredith has taken his characters and his incidents from actual life, then, and has given us some triumphant portraiture. If the book were pure fiction we should be disappointed at the action of the harassed heroine, but as it is pure fact we are the rather saddened at the weakness of poor humanity.

With his next story Mr Meredith came, I believe, as near to popular success as with any of his books immediately on their publication. The story was *Diana of the Crossways*, and the secret of its appeal to

the taste of the circulating libraries is not far to seek; it is to be found in the connection which was immediately suggested between one of Diana's actions and the actions of the Hon. Mrs Caroline Norton, a famous literary beauty of the mid-nineteenth century. That connection has, I fancy, been disclaimed by the author, but it had done its work in hinting that a real scandal might be at the back of the fiction, a hint which supplies sufficient incentive to a large number of readers. The opening chapter must, it may well be imagined, have been something of a surprise to many people accustomed to simpler forms of expression and to more attenuated thoughts. It is a "Meredithian" introduction to the story. This may be suggestive of difficulty to the inappreciative, but it is really equal to saying that it strikes the keynote of the chapters which follow. Here are suggested at once the character of the heroine, the circumstances of her surround-

ings, and a hint may be gathered of the course of her life-story. In what points of similarity that story coincides with that of the life of the beautiful Caroline Norton can easily be seen by a comparison with any biographical sketch of that gifted and unhappy lady : Diana was an Irishwoman, so was Mrs Norton ; Diana was the daughter of a wit of some reputation, and Mrs Norton was the granddaughter of Richard Brinsley Sheridan ; Diana married, with the unhappiest results, a man whom she scarcely knew, and so also did her suggested prototype ; Diana was made respondent, and a political chief co-respondent in a wholly unjustifiable divorce case, and here, too, we have a close parallel with the ridiculous suit instituted by Caroline Norton's husband against herself and Lord Melbourne. There is, however, no need to follow these similarities too closely, nor to imagine that because certain romantic incidents of Mrs Norton's career are pressed into the service

of the novelist that therefore all the incidents of the novel are taken from Mrs Norton's career. Such reasoning has been suggested, but it is, of course, wholly unsound.

Diana is a charming creation, full of Irish wit and whimsicality ; she enlists a champion under her banner in nearly every fresh reader of her story. "She is one of Shakespeare's women"—the words of her friend, Lady Dunstane, are true—"another character, but one of his own, another Hermione!" Her story is that of unsuitable marriage, one of the most tragical things known to our civilisation, and the tragedy is here the worse for being brought about by the action of the husband of Diana's dearest friend, one of those idle hands for which mischief is always readily provided. Alarmed at one man's behaviour, she looks upon marriage as the only safeguard from a predatory sex, and therefore marries a man of whom she knows but little, the tenant of her Sussex home, The Cross-

ways. Soon, indeed, she finds her last state is worse than her first. Describing the position to Lady Dunstane, she herself says: "He has not cause to like his wife. I can own it, and I am sorry for it, heartily. No two have ever come together so naturally antagonistic as we two. We walked a dozen steps in stupefied union, and hit upon crossways. From that moment it was tug and tug; he me, I him. By resisting, I made him a tyrant; and he by insisting made me a rebel. And he was the maddest of tyrants—a weak one." Here we see the double significance of the title of the novel in the crossways of matrimony as well as the name of the heroine's birthplace. Married and separated from her wholly uncongenial mate, her position is worse than it was before, and more particularly when something of passion is aroused in her by the young politician, Percy Dacier; with him, indeed, she is sorely tempted to fly and give her legal husband good cause for renewing

his efforts at release from their chain. Percy was not, however, worthy, and happily the hastily-designed elopement was prevented by the illness of Diana's friend, and so in the course of time the unworthiness of Dacier is made plain and the true hero of the story wins his fitting mate. The story as love-romance holds the reader's attention more closely than Mr Meredith's stories are wont to do, but it is in its central figure of a great woman greatly delineated that *Diana of the Crossways* most deeply impresses us. A few words, too, must be spared for Thomas Redworth, the sterling friend, the constant lover; a man in whom the novelist has portrayed a strong, wholesome Englishman—a typical Saxon, as Diana somewhere calls him. It is to him and to Lady Dunstane that Diana owes everything after her rash acceptance of Mr Warwick as her husband, as it is to his level-headedness perhaps that he owes the long postponement of his own happiness.

Rhoda Fleming, it will be remembered, closed on Dahlia's pathetic injunction to her brother-in-law, "Help poor girls,"* and so it is that the reading of *Diana of the Crossways* impresses us with another aspect of what has been foolishly called the woman question, and to Diana it is given to make a pertinent suggestion on the economic subjection of women—a suggestion that has less of novelty about it now than when it was written some seventeen years ago: "That is the secret of the opinion of us at present—our dependency. Give us the means of independence and we will gain it, and have a turn at judging you, my lords! You shall behold a world reversed. Whenever I am distracted by existing circumstances I lay my finger on the material conditions, and I touch the secret. Individually, it *may* be moral with us; collectively, it is material—gross wrongs,

* "He is good to women," is Nataly's eloquent tribute to Dartrey Fenellan in *One of Our Conquerors*.

gross hungers. I am a married rebel, and thereof comes the social rebel. I was once a dancing and singing girl."

Mr Meredith's feeling for the characteristics of scenery, and his love for the county he has so long made his home, come out very strongly in this story. His scenes about the Italian lakes, Percy's and Diana's early morning walk on the lovely Generoso, are unforgettable. No less remarkable are the bits of Surrey scenery here given, notably where Redworth has his night ride from Copsley to the Crossways, and later, where Diana and her friend drive along the chalk downs running parallel with the southern sandy ridge, the whole stretch of country is brought to the memory of anyone who has once seen it by the description, now comprehensive and now minute, but always revealing.

For his next novel Mr Meredith took a title from near the conclusion of one of his own short stories. Lady Camper has been

discussing matters with her nervous neighbour and caricaturing him the while. " ' So you may suppose I have studied you,' said she. ' But there is no real likeness. Slight exaggerations do more harm to truth than reckless violations of it. You would not have cared one bit for a caricature if you had not nursed the absurd idea of being one of our conquerors. It is the very tragedy of modesty for a man like you to have such notions, my poor, dear, good friend. The modest are the most easily intoxicated when they sip at vanity!'"

The "one of our conquerors" of the novel is Victor Radnor, an egoist of a more genial type than Sir Willoughby Patterne, a wealthy City man who dazzles the world with his successes, who is the centre of a delightful circle of friends, who has a winsome mate in Nataly, a lovable daughter in Nesta. They are all musical amateurs of great ability, and Victor's might appear to be the most perfect life but that there is a

skeleton in the Radnor cupboard, a skeleton which incessantly distresses Nataly and only reflectedly disturbs him. It is the story of Two who have defied the Law of the Land that they may conform to the Laws of Love, and of the tragic result thereof. To many readers *One of Our Conquerors* is a greater stumbling-block than any other of its author's works, and his greatest admirers will readily admit that in it Mr Meredith is at times more involved, more cryptic, than he had been before. The opening chapter is particularly uninviting to those who would read while they are running, but those who are content to do one thing at a time will find much in the volume to reward them. It is a thoroughly characteristic story of the writer's, although in it there is an accentuation of his least admirable literary qualities, his fondness for bovrilising thought—if I may be forgiven the word—into so small a compass of words that the sentences are really too "meaty." Yet despite the

difficulties of the language—and it is curious that in his later books, when the public was beginning to take a real interest in his work, Mr Meredith should, as though wilfully, have increased the difficulties of his literary expression—the novel will well reward the patient reader, and no other reader deserves rewarding. The whole story turns upon the union of a pair that could not marry, the man having in his youth married a woman much older than himself and then having eloped with the one for whom he had a genuine passion. It is a pathetic story, for the reader's interest is wholly with the irregular couple, so much so that it is with something of disappointment that we reach the end and find the longed-for death of the old legal wife came five and a half hours too late. But Mr Meredith never wrote for the "average novel-reader" of the reviewers; he is at once too true as an artist and too close an observer of life to do so, and we feel that such an end as the

book gives might well have been the end to such a chapter of human life, one of those chapters which occasioned the proverb that tells man, to his doubtful comforting, how though he may propose it is God who disposes.

Simeon Fenellan, Colney Durance—many are the notable if not always simple utterances which are put in the mouths of these two of the characters of the story on whom the author fathers so many of his wise witticisms, his terse utterances on men and the relations of men. In lighter characters we have, what we so often have in these novels, that touch of over-stressing which makes caricature, the most notable example here being the messenger Skepsey, who sees England's degeneration in the desuetude of the fistic science, and who, taken before a magistrate for assaulting his wife, explains to him that he was only giving the woman a necessary lesson in the art of self-defence. The elements of caricature are given in

some of the friends of the Radnor household, especially in Miss Graves and Mr Pempton, the lady and gentleman who each had a cure for most human ills in the abstinence from meat and strong drinks respectively. A bit of drollery unusual in these pages is given where Simeon Fenellan says:—

“I’ll own I feel envious; like the girl among a family of boys I knew, who were all of them starved in their infancy by a miserly father, that gave them barely a bit of Graves to eat and not a drop of Pempton to drink; and on the afternoon of his funeral I found them in the drawing-room, four lank fellows, heels up, walking on their hands, from long practice; and the girl informed me that her brothers were able to send the little blood they had in their bodies to their brains and always felt quite cheerful for it, happy, and empowered to deal with the problems of the universe, as they couldn’t on their legs; but she, poor thing, was forbidden to do the same.”

This is but an illustration used by one of the book's witty characters, but it is evidence of the novelist's more boisterous humour—of the subtle kind each of his novels affords abundance of examples. It is by no means characteristic of this particular story ; far more characteristic is the *rencontre* between Nesta when staying at Brighton and Mrs Marsett, a lady at whom the world points the finger which—given the cue—would be pointed no less ruthlessly at Nesta's own mother. Perhaps the serious close is foreshadowed from the first ; there is certainly much of the irony of life shown in the position of the beautiful Nataly who, happily situated as those who see her in the world can but think, is yet haunted by the falseness of the appearance which she is making. It is true that her love—and her loving and impetuous husband—justifies her position in her own regard, but the world has hot words and cold looks for those who sin against the conventions, while

the situation is accentuated by the question of the daughter grown to young womanhood and wooed by conventionality personified in a scion of the Peerage. Beautiful, indeed, are these two women, and it is with genuine sorrow that we see the elder one die a few hours before the death of the old eccentric whom she had supplanted years before in the affections of Victor Radnor. Victor and his loving Nataly gambled for a certain event, the death of Mrs Burman, thinking to date their fullest happiness from that event, but fate willed that the weak should outlive the strong. The reader, if saddened over the fate of Nataly and Victor, feels that Nesta receives the best that could be in marriage with Dartrey Fenellan, the strong and healthy friend to whom Nataly had always hoped to see her daughter united.

With *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* we come to yet another aspect of the marriage question. In the story which had immediately preceded it the author had, as we

have seen, shown us a young man married to a woman greatly his senior, and breaking the matrimonial tie on subsequently falling in love with a woman more fittingly designed by nature to be his mate. In the new story the well-fitted pair meet at the earliest time of awakening affection, meet only to be separated by indignant friends and guardians, and to meet again when she is married to a man forty years older than herself—a man who is at once one of the most noted military leaders of his time, a discredited general and the hero of Matey Weyburn's boyish adoration. The problem which early faces the reader is, how will the two behave—this man and woman who as boy and girl had eyed one another on the weekly march-out of their schools? A natural train of circumstances takes Matey—before launching out into schoolmasterdom—as secretary to his military idol, and so throws him into touch with the Countess, in whom he finds the Aminta (“Brownny”

of school days) of his constant affections. Loyalty is a strong feature of Weyburn's individuality, and he keeps loyal to himself and his employer, and it is purely by force of circumstances that he is driven to the course which he finally adopts. Less crowded than most of its companion volumes, *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* has four remarkable characters in the title folks, in Matey Weyburn and in Lord Ormont's sister, Lady Charlotte Eglett. Said Matey of the last-named lady, "She's one of the *living* women of the world," and the saying is applicable to so many of Mr Meredith's creations—they are living women who are made real to us in a way that many successful writers of fiction must envy. Aminta, as heroine, has a more conventional part to play—though in the long-run she plays it unconventionally. Fine, indeed, is the obstinate, markedly individual, kindly, thoroughly human Lady Charlotte—the womanly expression of the qualities that won Lord Ormont his honours

and also placed him under a cloud, but not possessed of that strain of blind eccentricity which makes Lord Ormont, while quarrelling with his country, place his young wife in a cruelly invidious position. It is perhaps quite in accord with the irony of things that it is the weaknesses of Lord Ormont's own strong character which bring about the ruin of his life—for "often a man's own angry pride is cap and bells to a fool." It is his strength, however, and not his weakness that comes out when he is thrown by chance in the company of his ex-secretary and the near neighbourhood of his eloped Aminta, and when he acts with a magnanimity which is not superhuman, but is so striking as to increase the reader's admiration for him, and the more so that his character has been so subtly presented that before the situation is fully explained one is prophetically conscious of how the old nobleman is about to act. Rarely beautiful is the swimming chapter towards the end of

this story—memory-haunting as the river-side chapter of *Richard Feverel*, the picnic scenes of *Evan Harrington*, the Monté Motterone chapter of *Vittoria*, the flight to the *Crossways of Diana*, and the lake-storm of *Harry Richmond*.

The laws which govern the mating of the sexes once more afforded Mr Meredith his theme in the last story of this remarkable series. The title is frankly *The Amazing Marriage*, piquing at once the curiosity of readers of the two immediately precedent. The theme, the manner, are widely different. We have a novel—one of the longest which Mr Meredith has written—irradiated with the peculiar atmosphere of comedy which glorifies the pages of the short history of General Ople. A story in which, before half-way through, we are called upon to witness some remarkable evolutions in the history of the amazing heroine; “one could almost laugh at our human fate, to think of a drop off the radiant mountain heights upon a

Whitechapel greengrocer's shop, gathering the title of Countess midway." The last of Mr Meredith's novels, I find this one of the most fascinating; it has about it something of the glamour of irresponsible romance, which is one of the charms of *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*; it is so full of wild improbabilities made real by the storyteller; it is so crowded with real full-blooded individualities, with men and women of strong character, the interplay of whose personalities forms a wonderful series of chapters.

To account for what I have called the glamour of irresponsible romance. Mr Meredith tells part of the story through the lips of Dame Gossip—thus making hints and allusions often supply the place of definite narrative. In the closing sentences the author explains that the book has been "an effort to render events as consequent to your understanding as a piece of logic, through an exposure of character." The

characters most closely exposed by subtle analysis and presentment are the two parties to the amazing marriage, the over-wealthy, weak, young English nobleman and the strong Carinthia Jane Kirby, the daughter of an English exile domiciled in Austria, fruit, with her brother Chillon John, of an earlier amazing marriage following on a great scandal in early life. Carinthia is another of "Meredith's women," those finely-gifted creatures to know whom, even but in the pages of fiction, is a liberal education in the humanities; she is a worthy companion of Sandra Belloni—another such unsophisticated, sweet-natured girl dowered with all excellent qualities, and though tried in the most terrible fashion, proving herself equal to every trial. It is a most romantic part which she has to play. The child of an old English naval officer, voluntary exile in the Austrian military service, and of the young Countess who had eloped with him, Carinthia is brought up unconventionally.

Left an orphan, she is returning to England with her brother, who has a commission in the British Army, and she dances at a ball with the wealthy, young, eccentric Earl of Fleetwood. In the dance he asks her to marry him, and she promptly consents. Later she knows nothing of his efforts to get released from his word, and readily marries him on her miserly uncle insisting on the union taking place. An unconventional wedding is followed by a more unconventional honeymoon, beginning with a prize-fight, which the groom and bride witness from the top of a coach. They are then driven to a village inn and the groom leaves her, and—but for a midnight visit to her by means of a ladder—leaves her alone with a Welsh maid until she is forced to try to see him. Then the comedy begins to develop rapidly, and Dame Gossip has much to say of the wealthy nobleman pursued by his White-chapel Countess. Fleetwood is an eccentric

whose behaviour—excused in the man of vast means—would receive from many folks a harsher name than eccentricity, and his flounderings would be amusing if it were not for the tragic significance of its bearing on the character of the wife whom he had married merely because he had given his word to do so. She loves him, but his actions ever go to increasing the tenuity of the bond, while he, on the contrary, when he does meet her, finds himself ever feeling more and more of an affection for her, until the positions become *almost* insensibly changed and the loving husband woingly pursued the frigidly friendly wife.

The closing pages have somewhat of a disappointment in them, for Fleetwood's share in the final rupture, which sends Carinthia with her loved brother to Spain and himself to a monastery, is not indicated with sufficient clearness to the reader, while to be told, as we are in the penultimate paragraph, that Carinthia married her Welsh

friend, Owain Wythan, comes as something of a shock, though the union of complex and simple might have proved happy. In the Welsh scenes we feel that we have in Carinthia another Diana Warwick, while her relations with her invalid friend, Rebecca Wythan, are reminiscent of Diana's intercourse with Emma Dunstane.

It is an amazing story, alike in the wild whirl of its incidents and its hovering ever upon the borderland of the almost unbelievably romantic, and in the wealth and the diversity of its characters, with in the oft-quoted "Old Buccaneer," his daughter Carinthia, her maid Madge, and the young philosopher Gower Woodseer, four that are unforgettable; but others, Ines, the prize-fighter, Chummy Potts and Abrane, the toady "Ixionides" of the man of wealth, are striking additions to such a diverse gallery of greatly-imagined and consistently-drawn characters as no novelist has exceeded.

It is with something of a painful feeling that one lays down *The Amazing Marriage*, the last of that series of great novels, painful because it is the last, although it is also part of a whole which may be described as a never-ending intellectual feast where whoso can enjoy the best may ever find a welcome and fresh delights. To the palates that can get a sufficient enjoyment out of scraps, the best fruits of the earth are unknown, and so to those who find their best entertainment in the "books of the hour"—the fugacities of fiction—I would not recommend the novels of Mr Meredith; but to those who can recognise and appreciate poetry, to those who can appreciate the work of a subtle reader of human character unexcelled since Shakespeare, to those who seek in fiction a stimulant and not an opiate, I would say study Mr Meredith. And be it ever remembered that, as Miss Louise Imogen Guiney has put it, "Mr Meredith's influence

in our own day is not such as will induce you to sit shaking your maudlin head over yourself and all creation."

When, having read all the novels, we come to consider Mr Meredith, we find ourselves contemplating one of the greatest masters in the art which he has expounded better than any other writer I know of—the art of Comedy. In the realm of richest comedy *The Egoist*, *Evan Harrington*, *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, and other of these novels are rich indeed. Nor is it merely, to adopt the language of the dramatic critics, in the comedy of situation that he is among the best—in the clash of words, the interplay of intellectual wit, he is no less great; one writer has claimed for him—and not without consideration—that he is the greatest wit in English literature, adding that Sheridan is not visible beside him. Apart from his wit, however, we find him a writer of the most robustly invigorating qualities, who, in the

richness and variety of his metaphorical illustrations, is without a better, whose subtle penetration into the motives of human action is so realistic as to be something of a new force in that department of philosophy which we call fiction—"our closest instructors, the true philosophers, the story-tellers, in short."

One of the earliest writers who preached Meredith, the clever and unhappy James Thomson, thought him to be "rather a man's than a woman's writer" because so strongly humoristic and ironical, but I think that if a poll of his appreciators could be taken one sex would not be found preponderating so greatly over the other, and it is certainly of interest to remember that one of the first two books devoted to a study of our greatest man of letters, and published almost simultaneously, was written by a woman, Miss Hannah Lynch. James Thomson it was who also first spoke of Meredith as "the Robert

Browning of our novelists"—a description which is more deeply true than might be imagined by those who see in it nothing but a stressing of the difficulty of the two—and one ably supported in the capital summing-up which "B. V." wrote:—

"He may be termed, accurately enough for a brief indication, the Robert Browning of our novelists; and his day is bound to come, as Browning's at length has come. The flaccid and feeble folk, who want literature and art that can be inhaled as idly as the perfume of a flower, must naturally shrink from two such earnestly strenuous spirits, swifter than eagles, stronger than lions, in whom, to use the magnificent and true language of Coleridge concerning Shakespeare, 'the intellectual power and the creative energy wrestle as in a war-embrace.' But men who have lived and observed and pondered, who love intellect and genius and genuine passion, who have eyes and ears ever open to the

mysterious miracles of nature and art, who flinch not from keenest insight into the world and life, who are wont to probe and analyse with patient subtlety the intricate social and personal problems of our complex quasi-civilisation, who look not to mere plot as the be-all and end-all of a novel reflecting human character and life, who willingly dispense with the childish sugar-plums of so-called poetical justice which they never find dispensed in the grown-up work-o'-day world, who can respond with thought to thought, and passion to passion, and imagination to imagination, and, lastly, who can appreciate a style vital and plastic as the ever-evolving, living world it depicts, equal to all emergencies, who can revel with clowns and fence with fine ladies and gentlemen, yes, rise to all grandeurs of Nature and Destiny and the human soul in fieriest passion and action; such men, who cannot abound anywhere, but who should be less rare among

meditative smokers than in the rest of the community, will find a royal treasure-house of delight and instruction and suggestion in the works of George Meredith."

Mr Meredith's own views of philosophy in fiction and of his own presentation thereof may be culled from various parts of his own writings. "The philosopher here peremptorily demands the pulpit," he somewhere says, and early in *Sandra Belloni* he gives a pertinent piece of parenthetical self-criticism in "The philosopher (I would keep him back if I could)." If he had done so he would have ceased to be the novelist we know and glory in. Further on in the same story we read, in a conversation between Cornelia Pole and Mr Barrett, a pertinent bit *apropos* of the work of Mr Tracy Runningbrooke—in whom I cannot help feeling that Mr Meredith has sketched some of the features of Mr Algernon Charles Swinburne:—

"The point to be considered is, whether

fiction demands a perfectly smooth surface. Undoubtedly a scientific work does, and a philosophical treatise should. When we ask for facts simply, we feel the intrusion of a style. Of fiction it is part. In the one case the classical robe, in the other any mediæval phantasy of clothing.'

"'Yes; true,' said Cornelia, hesitating over her argument. 'Well, I must conclude that I am not imaginative.'

"'On the contrary, permit me to say that you are. But your imagination is unpractised and asks to be fed with a spoon. We English are more imaginative than most nations.'

"'Then, why is it not manifested?'

"'We are still fighting against the Puritan element in literature as elsewhere.'

"'Your old bugbear, Mr Barrett.'

"'And more than this: our language is not rich in subtleties for prose. A writer who is not servile and has insight must coin from his own mint. In poetry we are rich

enough; but in prose also we owe everything to the license our poets have taken in the teeth of critics.’”

Mr Meredith returns to his partnership with the “Philosopher” towards the close of the same book:—

“Loath am I to continue my partnership with a fellow who will not see things on the surface, and is, as a necessary consequence, blind to the fact that the public detest him. I mean, this garrulous super-subtle, so-called Philosopher, who first set me upon the building of THE THREE VOLUMES, it is true, but whose stipulation that he should occupy so large a portion of them has made them rock top-heavy, to the forfeit of their stability. He maintained that a story should not always flow, or, at least, not to a given measure. When we are knapsack on back, he says, we come to eminences where a survey of our journey past and in advance is desirable, as is a distinct pause in any business, here and there. He points proudly to the

fact that our people in this comedy move themselves — are moved from their own impulsion—and that no arbitrary hand has posted them to bring about any event and heap the catastrophe. In vain I tell him that he is meantime making tatters of the puppets' golden robe—illusion: that he is sucking the blood of their warm humanity out of them. He promises that when Emilia is in Italy he will retire altogether; for there is a field of action, of battles and conspiracies, nerve and muscle, where life fights for plain issues, and he can but sum results. Let us, he entreats, be true to time and place. In our fat England the gardener Time is playing all sorts of delicate freaks in the hues and trceries of the flower of life, and shall we not note them? If we are to understand our species, and mark the progress of civilisation at all, we must. Thus the Philosopher. Our partner is our master, and I submit, hopefully looking for release with my Emilia in the day when

Italy reddens the sky with the banners of a land revived. . . .

“Such is the construction of my story, however, that to entirely deny the Philosopher the privilege he stipulated for when with his assistance I conceived it, would render our performance unintelligible to that acute and honourable minority which consents to be thwacked with aphorisms and sentences and a fantastic delivery of the verities. While my play goes on, I must permit him to come forward occasionally. We are indeed in a sort of partnership, and it is useless for me to tell him that he is not popular and destroys my chance.”

After all, it is but an acute and honourable minority that reads and appreciates Shakespeare, and a true thinker can only hope to reach a minority within that minority among his contemporaries.

In *Beauchamp's Career*, too, we find this recognition of the fact that the author's manner is not the popular manner (*see* quota-

tion on pp. 131, 132); again, in *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*, after a passage considering the heroine psychologically, the author confesses that there is little pleasure to be found "on the lecture-rostrum for a narrator sensible to the pulse of his audience." And yet once more, in one of the earliest stories, *Evan Harrington*, we had recognition of what may be termed the Meredithian method, "Action! action!—he sighed for it as I have done since I came to know that this history must be morally developed."

We feel of Mr Meredith that he, like his own Gower Woodseer—in whom we seem to read something of the author's own character—has "the Cymric and Celtic respect of character which puts aside the person's environment to feel the soul;" and here, too, we may note his admiration for the Welsh character which comes out again and again in the studies of life to which these chapters may, it is sincerely hoped, turn a few readers. It is better to read true

books than such *biblia a biblia* as this, which is but an attempt at an introduction, a kind of newly-planted finger-post on a literary highway—uninteresting and unpicturesque in itself, but pointing with digital emphasis to a place of inexhaustible treasure.

What Hazlitt said of a much smaller man may with far greater force be applied to Mr Meredith—"He employs the arts of fiction; not to adorn the deformed, or disguise the false, but to make truth shine out the clearer, and beauty look more beautiful."

V

LIST OF WORKS

THE Bibliography of Mr Meredith's writings which has been admirably prepared by Mr John Lane is bound up with Mr Le Gallienne's tribute to the poet. Some day it may be hoped that Mr Lane will see fit to issue that Bibliography by itself. Here I simply give a chronological list of Mr Meredith's books.

- 1851. *Poems.*
- 1856. *The Shaving of Shagpat.*
- 1857. *Farina.*
- 1859. *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel.*
- 1861. *Evan Harrington.*
- 1862. *Modern Love, and Other Poems.*
- 1864. *Emilia in England* (renamed *Sandra Belloni*).
- 1865. *Rhoda Fleming.*
- 1867. *Vittoria.*

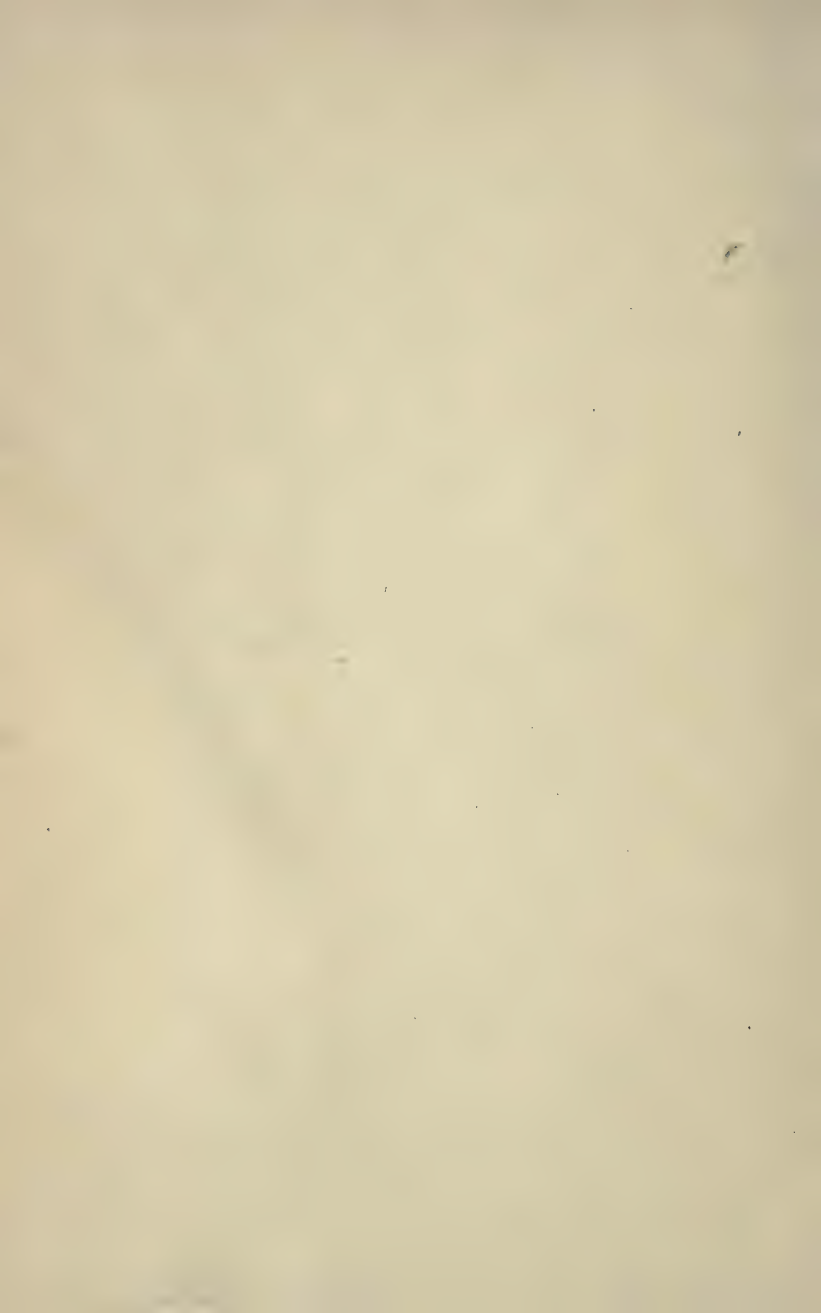
1871. *The Adventures of Harry Richmond.*
 1876. *Beauchamp's Career.*
 1879. *The Egoist.*
 1881. *The Tragic Comedians.*
 1883. *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth.*
 1885. *Diana of the Crossways.*
 1887. *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life.*
 1888. *A Reading of Earth.*
 1891. *One of Our Conquerors.*
 1892. *The Empty Purse, and Other Poems.*
 1894. *The Tale of Chloe, and Other Stories.* (*The
 Tale of Chloe; The House on the Beach;
 Farina; The Case of General Ople and
 Lady Camper.*)
Lord Ormont and His Aminta.
 1895. *The Amazing Marriage.*
 1897. *An Essay on Comedy.*
Selected Poems.
 1898. *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French
 History.*
Poems (collected in two volumes).
 1901. *A Reading of Life, with Other Poems.*

Many of these works have been issued in several forms. All of the novels, up to and including *One of Our Conquerors*, with the single exception of *The Tragic Comedians*, were issued in dark blue cloth covers, and

that, I think, thanks to associations, remains the favourite edition with most of Mr Meredith's earlier readers. Then Messrs Constable issued a complete uniform library edition in thirty-two volumes, carefully revised by the author, and later a popular six-shilling edition in red cloth, marked with the author's monogram. This year the last-named firm has issued the novels and stories in a set of fifteen delightful "pocket" volumes, printed on very thin paper, but in the same type as that employed in the six-shilling edition, bound in red ribbed cloth, and with the author's autograph in gold on the cover.

“ Full lasting is the song, though he,
The singer, passes.”

The Thrush in February.



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